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A FEW MINUTES OF THIS, THEN HE DREW A SMALL ROLL FROM HIS BREAST, AND UNFURLING, HELD IT ALOFT OVER HIS HEAD.

Night-Hawk Kit;

OR,

The Daughter of the Ranch.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "BLACK JOHN, THE ROAD-AGENT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"CAPTAIN KIT."

THE sun had not long crossed the meridian, on a warm, sultry day in midsummer, something less than two decades previous to the present day.

It is to a slightly rolling "timber-prairie," that we ask the reader's attention. This prairie extended for some distance along one of the confines of the river Brazos, and was covered with a dense growth of flowers and tall grasses, though scattered in irregular patches.

One passing down the stream, with it on his right hand could distinguish before him an abrupt range of hills, rough and precipitous, at apparently four or five miles' distance. They looked dark and forbidding, being thickly covered with evergreens and parasite plants.

From behind one of these "timber-islands" or *mottes* alluded to, rode a single horseman, with front toward the hills. Both the steed and equestrian were such as would have called forth more than a passing glance, although both bore traces of long and arduous travel.

The young man—for he did not seem to have numbered more than five or six and twenty years of age—was of an uncommon symmetrical build; tall and athletic, with limbs that, yet in proportion, were seemingly possessed of more than common strength and activity.

His hair was worn long and slightly curling, his eyebrows were black and heavy as twin arcs of velvet, arching his brows, beneath which burned a pair of richly-tinted hazel eyes, large, full and expressive. His complexion was a rich glowing brown, and a heavy mustache and beard covered the lower portion of his face.

A slouched felt hat rested upon his head, and his garments were an admixture of the ranger and ranchero type, picturesque and comfortable.

Balanced across the saddle before him was a short, richly-ornamented rifle of heavy caliber, and from the belt at his waist peeped the silver-mounted butts of a knife and brace of revolvers.

The horse he bestrode was evidently a mustang, but yet of unusual size and beauty. Naturally a deep glowing chestnut, his smooth coat was now darkened, by sweat and dust, to an almost blackness. A small "blaze" in the forehead, and one white stocking, were all the distinguishing marks about him.

"Come, old fellow," muttered the rider, tightening the bridle-reins and speaking to the steed. "We must hurry up. The boys will be impatient. We are behind time, now."

Slightly pricking his steed's flanks with the

spur, the horseman dashed over the prairie at a rapid gait, sitting his animal so gracefully that he seemed born to the saddle. A few minutes of this, then he drew a small roll from his breast, and, unfurling, held it aloft over his head.

It was a small flag with a white star imprinted in the center, and bearing a peculiar cipher in the corner. After waving this to and fro for a minute, the rider replaced it in his breast and then dashed on direct toward a peculiar-looking *motte*.

From the center of this island, and far overtopping the rest rose three bare objects, not unlike the naked masts of a ship, clearly outlined against the sky.

Drawing rein when at the very edge of this clump, the horseman uttered a shrill, peculiar whistle. Almost like an echo came an answering sound from the timber, and then one man advanced upon foot to meet the stranger.

"We war expecting you, cap'n; leastwise we was a man. But you look mighty young fer sech a place," spoke the new-comer, as he gazed scrutinizingly at the horseman.

"Do I? But look—here are the signs; the flag, the whistle, the grip; then look in this corner. You see the cipher? Well—does it correspond?" at the same time he handed forth the blue flag.

"It's *the* one—an' you hev t'others all right. Then you're Cap'n—"

"Captain Kit—yes," laughed the young man. "But are the boys here—and how many are there?"

"'Leven—with me. T'others'r' out on a raid. We number forty—all told."

"Can they be depended upon?"

"Bet yer life! I picked 'em," was the proud reply.

"Are they brave? and will they obey orders without asking questions?"

"Ef they won't, then swaller me up in a sand-storm! Ef you—or me—was to bring 'em face to face with the devil hisself, an' shake a finger at him, any one on the cusses 'd up an' go through him like a dose o' salts!"

"Good! but they'll never be tried so hard. The Old Boy is by far too good a friend of ours for that," laughed the young man; a clear, gleesome laugh that ill accorded with his words. "But lead on, I wish to see them myself. I can tell better then what to depend upon."

"They're right in hyar, anxious for a squint at tha'r new boss. Better 'light. It's rather clus ridin' through this 'ere brush."

The captain dismounted and followed his guide; a burly, hairy-faced, rough-looking man, dressed in a nondescript garb, and armed until he resembled a walking arsenal. A few moments brought them to a small glade-like opening, surrounding the three dead trees that formed a landmark for miles around.

In this spot were collected a half-score of men and horses, the former rudely dressed, but superbly armed, and who arose from their careless attitudes as the two appeared.

"Boys, this is the boss you've heard about—Cap'n Kit."

The parties thus briefly introduced gazed steadily at each other for several moments, as if they would read there what to expect for the

future. Then he who had given his name as "Kit," spoke:

"Boys, I am glad to see you, and to find that what this man has told me is the truth. He said that I could depend upon you in everything. He was surprised because I was no older, and I can see that some of you think the same. But do not go altogether by that. Young shoulders often bear old heads. You can test me before long, and then, if found wanting, and there is any one that you like better, I am willing to abdicate in his favor.

"As a token that I will not be neglectful of your interests, I will tell you how you each can make a pretty sum by nightfall. There will be no risk, either, though I know that would make no difference to you. Will you do it?"

"Yes!" was the general cry.

"Good! Had you asked what it was first, I should have told you to find out for yourselves. I want no half-way trust. There must be only one voice—one captain, of the band I command. But listen. There is a man—a cattle-drover, from Louisiana—who left Nacogdoches at the same time I did. I had quite a talk with him, and found out that he was intending to buy up a drove, and had the hard cash to pay for them. By my advice, he is coming here to buy of the farmers at the Bluffs. I kept trace of him, and he will be along here before many hours. We can stop him, and once securing his gold, can dispose of him as the majority votes.

"How do you like it?"

There was a general chorus of approval, and the outlaws—for such they evidently were—seemed highly pleased. The majority, but not all.

One of the number—a small, slight-built man, with a most villainous countenance—muttered to his neighbor, and then glanced doubtfully at Captain Kit. That worthy's eagle glance did not miss this, and leveling one finger to indicate his meaning, he said:

"You fellow—step out here and tell me what you are growling at? It don't sound well, my good friend, and besides, it is a very unhealthy habit. I have known more than one good-looking fellow—like yourself, for instance—to go off very suddenly from its effects."

The man stepped forward boldly enough, but stood before the stranger with a sullen, downcast look.

"What is your name?"

"Cock-eyed Smatters."

"A nice name to sleep with! What was it you told that man?" sternly added Captain Kit.

"Yer name—that's all."

"He has ears—he must have heard it for himself. I spoke loud enough."

"Your t'other name, I mean."

"My—what? I don't understand you. Speak out plain."

"Wal, you say you come from Nacogdoches. I see'd you this mornin'!"

"You did? I must doubt that, my man. It is not every horse that can cover so much ground as mine has done to-day. But what do you mean? Are you drunk?"

"No, I ain't; I mean that I see'd you this

mornin', over nigh Pierson's ranch. I mean that you be none other than Kirk Dalton, herder to the ol' Judge."

"You are a fool—or crazy. I know no such person as you mention. I have not been in this neighborhood for over a year," angrily cried the captain, nervously fingering a revolver.

"Smatters ain't to blame, cap'n," interposed the man who had advanced to meet the newcomer. "Fer you're the puffest image o' the boy he names. I more'n hafe b'lieved you was him, at first. But in co'se it can't be."

"Am I so much like him, then?"

"So much so, that ef he was hungry, an' 'd chaine to see you, he'd be puzzled to know which mouth to stick the grub inter! He would so!"

"Well, we will talk this over hereafter. Now I want you to get in a line and give me your names, so I can put them on the list, and answer whatever questions I may ask you."

This request, or rather order, was promptly obeyed. Probably not two of the eleven gave the name they had been christened by—supposing they had ever undergone that ceremony—but those they did give, were at least significant, and fully answered the purpose.

Among them were *nom de guerres* that were then, or have since become, notorious upon the Texan border.

There were Old Mose, Bob Rattlesnake, Uncle Buck, Yankee Zeke, Cornercracker, and others who may be introduced as we proceed.

This done, one of the band was ordered to climb a tree and keep a close lookout for the expected drover, and then the others composed themselves to careless waiting. The sun sunk behind the horizon, and the gray shades of twilight were settling over the earth, ere the welcome cry came from the tree-top, causing all below to spring to their feet in eagerness:

"*Thar he comes!*"

Captain Kit cautioned his men to keep silent, and advanced to the edge of the *motte*. Gazing out for a few moments, he made out the form of a single horseman approaching the timber island, and from the expected direction. Although quite dusk, he did not doubt but what this was the drover he had decoyed hither to suffer robbery, if not death.

Returning to the glade, he said, gayly:

"Well, boys, it's our game. I don't think he'll show fight, but if he does, leave him to me. It is two weeks since I drew bead on a live man. But wait until I give the word. No need of standing a chase when we can manage without."

The unsuspecting horseman drew near at a slow trot, his horse evidently jaded by a long day's ride. When he was within a hundred yards of the *motte*, Captain Kit rode forth and leisurely approached the traveler, followed by outlaws.

The stranger abruptly drew rein and threw forward his rifle, as he peered keenly through the fast-gathering gloom. But then, as if reassured, he gave free rein and rode forward.

"Hallo, old man, which way?" cried Captain Kit, in a clear, mellow voice.

"Thet you, Kirk? You gi'n me quite a skeer, a-ridin' out on a feller thet-a-way. What's up thet you've got sech a crowd wi' you—an' sech

a gang, too!" he added, suspiciously, as the outlaws came nearer.

"A thousand furies!" cried Captain Kit, angrily. "This is not our game!"

"It's old Josh Crane!"

"Yas, Mr. Robert Rattlesnake, *Esquire*, it ar' old Uncle Josh. An' s'posin 'tis? The peraries is free, I reckon, to all as notions to tramp 'em. But you, Kirk; I didn't think ever to see *you* in sech a pesky crowd," added the old man, in a reproachful tone.

He was a picturesque-looking personage, then and there, seen in the dim twilight, seated upon his jaded but fiery mustang. His figure looked gigantic, outlined against the less opaque sky.

Six feet in his moccasins, Joshua Crane was built in proportion. Great as was his weight—over two hundred pounds—there was nothing but good solid flesh, bone and muscle in his gigantic frame. He carried his half century as well as many of half the number of years.

Brave as a lion, yet gentle as a woman, he was loved and hated, feared and respected for hundreds of miles around. Loved by honest people, hated by rogues and scoundrels.

Naturally peaceful, he had yet been forced to leave a trail behind him marked with blood. An attack was made upon his cabin, but the outlaws fled, leaving three of their number dead upon the ground. Since then he had not been disturbed.

"Who is this man?" demanded the outlaw leader of his followers.

"An' you ax thet, Kirk Dalton? Ax who Uncle Josh is?" cried Crane, in a tone of great surprise, mingled with reproach.

"I don't know you—I am not Kirk Dalton."

"I don't know why you shed try to deny your name, lad. It ain't like you. No more'n 'tis your keepin' company with such as old Mose an' Rattlesnake, thar. But my eyes is still good. I couldn't forgit you ef I tried, Kirk."

"You won't believe me? Very well, then; so be it! Since you seem to think so much of me, Uncle Josh, perhaps you'll be so kind as to give me a promise," retorted Captain Kit.

"Ef I kin, I will. I've al'ays bin your fr'end, Kirk, an' I shed hate mightily to hev to change my 'pinion this late in the day; but take the old man's advice, boy, an' steer cl'ar of those rascals as you're with."

"Look hyar, Uncle Josh!" angrily cried Rattlesnake his eyes flashing with a strange, deadly glare. "You'd best remember whar you air, an' keep a civil tongue in yer old head. You mought chaine to git a bullit through it fer you."

"An' you, mister hoss-thief, mind what I say. I never yit see the time as I was afeard o' sech scum as you be, an' it's too late to begin now. You needn't finger your pistil. Afore you could raise the cock, I'd plug ye, fr'ends or no fr'ends. You know *me*—if you don't, jist make another call at my shanty!" sternly retorted Crane, half-raising his rifle.

"Hold!" cried Captain Kit, spurring his horse between the disputants. "Keep your temper, Rattlesnake, and you, old man, drop your gun. If there's any shooting to be done here to-night, I'll do it."

"Have your will, boy," cried Crane, slowly uncocking his rifle. "I'm a peaceable critter when they don't rub the wrong way 'o the fur. But ef I am old, I don't 'low nobody to spit in my face and then rub it in."

"Well, we'll let that drop. You shall not be hurt if you will give me a simple promise not to tell anybody of what you have seen and heard this night, for the next two weeks. Then you may use your own judgment. Will you do it?"

"You talk mighty queer, Kirk. Sounds 's though you was tryin' to skeer the old man. I thought you knowed me better'n thet."

"I am not trying to scare you. I only wish you to promise me this. I have good reason for it, as you may find out before long. I want this little ride kept secret for a bit. More than all from Pierson."

"Wal, I don't see what you're drivin' at, lad, but I reckon I kin trust you. So fer two weeks from this night, I won't tell ary pusson—not even Hepsy—that I met you hyar."

"Me nor the others?"

"Them too, ef you say so."

"Very well. Now you can ride on. I wish you a very good-night, Uncle Josh," laughed the outlaw leader, in a peculiar tone.

"Won't you come 'long, too, Kirk? 'Tain't right fer sech as you to be a-ridin' the kentry over 'th sech trash as them. Come, go 'long 'th the old man an' let's talk this over," urged Crane.

"Sorry to disoblige you, uncle, but really must decline your invitation. I have more important business on hand. But remember your promise."

"I do 'member it, but I never thought to 'a' see'd the day that Kirk Dalton 'd doubt the word 'o Josh Crane, to his very face. It's a sad change; I can't understand it."

"Don't try to then. It might strike in and injure you. Good-night."

"Good-night be it then, sence you won't take a fr'end's advice," and Joshua Crane rode slowly away, not once turning his head to glance at those he left behind him.

There was a grieved expression on his homely but honest face, that told how deeply he had been hurt by the strange change in one whom he firmly believed to be his young friend, Kirk Dalton. He had loved the boy as though his own child, and now to be deceived, as he had been, was bitter indeed.

And then to see his friend associating with such men as Rattlesnake, Old Mose, and the others, many of whom were known outlaws and desperadoes, pained his heart still deeper. As he said, it was a sad change.

CHAPTER II.

KIRK DALTON.

It was an hour or so before sunset, upon the day next succeeding that with which our story opens. As then, the figure of a horse and rider might be noticed.

But the one now before us is a lady, who sits her mettlesome steed with the grace of an accomplished equestrian, added to the peculiar ease and dashing self-reliance only attained by lessons learned in the wild freedom of the prairies of the great West.

She was rather below than above the medium height, of a neat, well-turned and rounded figure. A brunette, with merry, laughing eyes that could yet sparkle wickedly or flash with anger.

Her face was one of those irregular in outline, but yet perfect; plain in detail, yet when taken together, forming one bewitchingly piquant. It was the face of one formed to love and be loved; not worshiped.

Her cheeks were flushed brightly, whether with exercise or some other emotion, and there was an expectant look in her eyes as she reined her mustang down to a walk. Her quick glance noted the form of a horseman just emerging from the shadows of a little *motte*, and averting her head with a wicked smile, she gave free rein and sped off over the prairie.

The other gazed after her for a moment, and then, as if satisfied, urged his horse forward, calling aloud with a clear, ringing voice. As if startled, the maiden abruptly drew rein and turned her head.

"Why, Mr. Dalton, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed, as he rode up.

"I am very sorry, Miss Carrie, but I saw you riding by, and as I wished to speak to you, I called. It would have been useless to have given chase, while you ride Cap," he returned, extending his hand, sun-embrowned and toil-hardened.

"One would think you had not seen me for a year, instead of only this morning, by that," but the proffered hand was allowed to clasp the tiny gloved fingers.

"It is not that alone, Miss Carrie," replied Kirk. "But I have something to tell you, and thought I would guard against your running away before I had your answer."

"Indeed! Then you may as well free my hand, for I will not speak while you hold it."

She spoke boldly enough, but there was a fluttering at her heart that caused her eyes to droop and a bright flush to suffuse her cheeks. Right well she knew what was coming; but as she made no effort to withdraw her hand, it is not likely the expectation was very unpleasant.

And it was a handsome man that looked down upon her face; one that might well excuse such a feeling. Tall and shapely, his suit of half-hunter, half-ranchero, sat picturesquely upon him, and revealed his symmetrical form to great advantage.

Dark and sun-embrowned, with long black hair, slightly curling; eyes a deep brown, heavy yet silken eyebrows, mustache and beard; a slouched felt hat, looped up in front with a simple knot of crimson ribbon.

Such was Kirk Dalton, the very counterpart of him who had called himself Captain Kit. If not the same, there was a wondrous resemblance between the two.

"I hope you will, Carrie, for a great deal depends upon your answer. It will either make or ruin me. What I ask you now will determine the whole future of my life. Shall I speak?"

"You are the strongest—I don't see how I am to hinder you if you choose to speak," retorted the maiden, with a shy but roguish glance at his handsome face.

"I will, then, although you must know what I mean. I could not have hidden it from you this long had I tried. Carrie, I love you!"

"Indeed! and is that all?"

"All?"

"Yes; I expected to hear something dreadful by your solemn tones and owl-like looks. A murder, or a buried treasure, at the very least!" declared the girl, with a roguish laugh; but the color deepened on her cheek, and a soft light shone in her eyes.

"Carrie, did you understand what I said? If you know how serious this is to me; how deeply, madly I love you, you would not trifle with my feelings."

"I do know it, Kirk, and I am a foolish girl. I know you love me—have known it for a year, although you have never spoken it in words before. If it had been *very* displeasing, I should have acted differently from what I have done," earnestly replied Carrie, raising her dark eyes and gazing into those of the young herder.

"Carrie, you cannot—you are not playing with me, now? You know what you say?"

"I know this, Kirk: that you love me—that I love you—and have for a year past," softly murmured the maiden, her eyes drooping.

And then with a joy too great for utterance, the young herder bent forward, and winding an arm around her lithe waist, lifted her to his level, and then their lips met in the warm, passionate kiss of pure, holy love.

"There, now—you great, rough bear!" cried Carrie, blushing furiously. "See what you've done, mussed my hair, rumpled my dress, and let Cap stray off without me! Let me down this instant, or I'll—"

"My darling!" fondly murmured Kirk.

"Let me down at once, or I'll talk it all back—every word!"

"Well, then; wait here, Carrie—*my* Carrie now!—until I can catch Cap for you."

Gently lowering the maiden to the ground, Dalton rode off at a gallop toward the spot where the gray mustang was eating, and stooping, grasped at the rein. But at a shrill whistle from its mistress, the horse threw up its heels, and wheeling, soon stood beside its fair rider.

"You promise better than you perform, Kirk," laughed Carrie, but her glee was suddenly interrupted by a little cry of surprise.

Dalton rode up beside her, and stooping raised her lithe form from the ground and deposited it snugly into the saddle, stealing at least one kiss during the operation.

"That makes amends, pet," he laughed; then adding, in a graver tone: "but it is growing late and we had better ride toward the ranch. There is much I would like to take over with you before meeting the Judge."

"Why so—you are not going—" faltered Carrie.

"Yes, it is the better way. I shall tell him to-night, unless you forbid. Carrie, what will be the answer?"

"I do not know. He loves me dearly and respects you, as I believe. But then he is proud, and has often said that I should marry no man who was not rich and well born," thoughtfully replied the maiden.

"And I am neither!" bitterly added Kirk.

"A poor herder, I have only one horse and my weapons. I do not know where I was born, who were my parents, whether they were honest or guilty, poor or rich. I feared my happiness was too great to last!"

"Wait—it may not be so bad. But, Kirk, if I dearly love my father, I love you more. If he tries to separate us, he will lose me also. I could not live without you, now!"

Their subsequent conversation was more interesting to the lovers than it would be to the reader, and we pass it over. The sun had sunk behind the horizon for some time, when the long rambling "ranch" of Hiram Pierson was reached, and the two young folks separated.

Kirk Dalton left the premises and then struck down the river. His steps were slow for his thoughts were busy.

After walking thus for considerably over a mile, he paused. Before him, upon the summit of a little knoll, stood a rude-looking but substantial log hut, from whose open doorway streamed a blaze of ruddy light, that, added to the savory scent, told of the evening meal's being prepared.

Before the door sat a man, whose huge form told that it could be none other than the owner of the solitary dwelling, Joshua Crane. Not another such figure could there be found within a radius of fifty miles.

"Hallo! Uncle Josh, busy with your rifle, as usual," cried Kirk, in a cheery tone.

The old man paused in rubbing his long-barreled rifle, and glanced up. The friendly twilight hid a sad, half-perplexed expression that rested upon his face.

He did not speak, but looked steadily at the young herder as though he would read the inmost workings of his heart. Dalton approached and seated himself upon the same log, adding wonderingly:

"Why, uncle, what is the matter with you to-night? You don't answer me, and then you look so queer! What has gone wrong?"

"Kirk, I was over to the 'Three Pines' this afternoon," at length said Crane, slowly, while he gazed keenly at the young man.

"Were you? Did you see anything there to scare you that you look so grave?"

"Yas—I did!"

"And what was it?"

"Kirk, tell me what you was a'ter thar, yis't-day night?"

"I there? I was not within three miles of the place all day! What do you mean, Uncle Josh?"

"Not—then I didn't see you thar last night, as I was a-comin' from Michler's?"

"You did not, most assuredly!"

"You wasn't with Bob Rattlesnake, Old Mose an' t'other rascals? You didn't speak to me an' ax me to make you a promise not to tell nobody 'at I'd met you thar for the nixt two weeks?"

"A promise? Why, Uncle Josh, you know this is the first time I have spoken to you for four days!" cried Kirk, in a tone of surprise, that, if assumed, stamped him as a most adroit dissembler.

"I hev two eyes yit, boy, an' ef they ain't quite so sharp as they use to was, they're plenty

good enough to tell a man 'at I've knowed for well-nigh three years. I don't see why you shed deny yourself to me, now that we're alone. It was dusk, I know; jist about like 'tis now, but I was so cluss thet I could 'a' tetch'd you by retchin' out my arm. I see your face; I heerd your v'ice; how could I be fooled?"

"I don't understand this, uncle. You say you saw me there at this time, while I was over on the 'barrens' gathering in some cattle that had strayed from the herd. You must have been mistaken; and yet, I do not see how that could well be. There is no one in this section who so greatly resembles me that you should be deceived," thoughtfully said Kirk.

"Was any one with ye, lad? Could you prove that you was thar at thet time?" eagerly added Crane.

"No, I was alone. Myrick was sick this morning, and I had his share to attend to as well as my own. I was alone all day."

"I am sorry for thet—blamed sorry! I could a'most doubt my eyesight an' hearin' ruther 'n your word. I would give my rifle hyar, much as I'm 'tached to it, ef so be you could on'y prove thet you was some place else, jist at thet time!"

"What do you mean, Uncle Josh? Even if I were there, and with those you mention—which is an impossibility, for I despise them too much for that—where would be the great harm?"

"Kirk, do you know what I found out thar, to-day?"

"No—how should I?"

"Not fifty yards from the timmer, thar lies the body of a man—a stranger—shot through the head. It war did some time last night, fer the dew had fell on him. He wasn't thar when I rid by, fer he lies plum acrost the trail."

"A dead man?"

"Dead an' robbed. An old man, too, who wasn't 'lowed no time to 'fend hisself; fer thar was no marks o' a scuffle."

"It is sad—but what has all this to do with me?"

"You war thar at 'bout the time. You wanted it kept secret. You said when you rid up cluss an' see'd who I war—'*Boys, this ain't our game!*' Thet poor cuss war somebody's game."

"You do not—you *can not* think that I had aught to do with this devilish crime?" hotly cried the young herder, springing to his feet.

"Two days sence I'd 'a' knocked the feller down as would 'a' hinted at sech a thing. But I see'd you thar—I'd take my Bible oath on't!—an' yit you deny it. What *kin* I think, when I 'member who you was with?"

"Uncle Josh, if anybody else should say half that much to me, I would stop his jaw with a bullet! You have been my friend for a long time, but even *you* can go too far," sternly replied Kirk.

And in truth, there did not seem much of the criminal about him, as he drew his tall, handsome form erect, with the moonlight glowing full upon his open, indignant countenance.

"I hev bin your friend, Kirk, an' I will be yit, ef so be you'll 'low me. We must go to-night an'

put the poor devil under ground. Ef found thar it'll raise a big muss, sure!"

"No—I will do no such thing. I shall tell the neighbors of the body, and have the matter investigated," firmly replied Dalton.

"It would be the death o' you, boy! Ef I am axed on oath—as I will be, sure—I must tell the hull truth."

"You are at liberty to do so, for aught I care; I am innocent. And now, good-by."

"Won't you come in an' stop, lad? I'd like to talk this over 'th you further."

"No. You doubt my truth. I will never take you by the hand, or eat a bit under your roof, until you take back your words. I do not know what I have done that you should try to blacken the character of an honest man. I am poor, but thank God! there is no such stain upon my heart!"

With these words Dalton turned and strode rapidly away, not heeding the voice of Crane, who called after him.

The young herder strode on toward the dwelling of Judge Pierson, taking little note of surrounding objects. The thought of Carrie and the sweet confession he had won from her lips, quickly overpowered and dispelled all the suspicions evidently entertained by Crane.

Dalton had just crossed a little creek and ascended the summit of a slight knoll, when he was suddenly aroused from his pleasant reverie by the unmistakable sound of footsteps. Glancing quickly around, while one hand instinctively dropped to his revolver-butt, he beheld the forms of three men at but a few yards' distance, approaching him, yet evidently wishing to do so unheard.

"Hallo! there, do you take me for a deer, that you try to stalk me this way?" said the young man, half-drawing his pistol.

"Is that you, Kirk Dalton?"

"And supposing it is me, what has that to do with you, Cock-eyed Smatters?"

"I've got sumthin' to tell you. Wait till we come up."

"No, you don't! Whatever you have to tell, it must be from there. I don't care about being over close to you, especially in the night-time."

"You ain't afeard, be you?" sneered Smatters.

"Not much! But there are several animals one likes best at a distance. A pole-cat, for instance—and yourself!"

"You crow mighty loud and peert, my covey, but we kin cut yer comb an' blunt yer spurs. Come, boys—one rush together an' he's ourn!"

As he spoke these words, Smatters leaped forward, evidently counting upon taking the herder by surprise, and overcoming him by their united strength ere he could draw a weapon. But in this he was doomed to disappointment.

Dalton's keen eye noted the movement, and divining his danger, drew his revolver as he leaped back a pace, still facing his foes. Then one arm straightened out and the moonbeams gleamed upon the polished tube of a revolver.

"Stop!" shouted Kirk, in a tone of stern command. "One step nearer, and you die!"

There was a cadence in his tones that caused the trio of outlaws to pause, involuntarily,

rather than from any personal fear. Then the four personages were brought almost together upon the crest of the knoll.

Dalton, standing firmly erect, with keen eyes glancing along the polished tube. The three desperadoes half-crouching before him, clutching knives and pistols that were not yet drawn from their belts.

"Cock-eyed Smatters, Yankee Zeke and Roaring Sam! A pretty little surprise party, upon my word! Halt! not a step nearer, or I fire! What is it you want with me?"

"Fu'st tell us who you air?"

"Kirk Dalton—as you ought to know by this time."

"Then you ain't the man that sent us? You ain't Cap'n Kit, tryin' to foolish us?" added Smatters.

"I have not sent you any place—as yet. Though if you don't keep your distance, I *will* send you—upon a longer journey than you care about taking."

"Take him, boys! Ef he's the boss he'd orter know better'n to fool 'th us so. Take him, but don't hurt the cuss!" snarled Smatters, as he crouched down and leaped forward.

A clear report rung out, and, met in mid-air by the death-dealing bullet, the cock-eyed outlaw tumbled headlong to the ground, with a shattered skull. A single groan—a convulsive clutching of the hands upon the soft earth, was all.

There came two more shots, quickly following; then a short, confused struggle. As the smoke cleared away upon the fresh breeze, the moonlight shone upon a thrilling scene.

The dead man lying in his blood! The tall form of the young herdsman standing upon one side, with his left hand clutching the throat of Roaring Sam, who had been partially stunned by a blow from the pistol-butt, whose muzzle was now leveled at the crouching form of the third outlaw, whose cheek bore a ghastly wound.

"You've played your hand, Yankee Zeke," said Kirk, coolly, following the movements of the outlaw's head with the dark tube; "and you've got badly euchered. My pistol has three loads yet, and if I crook my finger the least bit, where will you be?"

"Ef you miss, you're mine!" growled the outlaw.

"But I won't miss. Don't try to draw that revolver! If you do, I'll spot you! Tell me what you fellows meant by this?"

"Shoot an' be durned! I won't blow!"

"I have half a mind to take you at your word, by all that's good! But go your way. One is enough for now, and Smatters will never ambush another honest man. I give you one minute to travel. When I count twenty, if you are in sight, I'll crack your skull like a dog!"

In a slow, measured tone Dalton began counting. The desperado slowly rose erect, and said:

"All right—I'll go. You've got the 'vantage now, but I'll pay you yit fer this!" and he touched the wound upon his face.

"Don't blow. Better be thankful that it didn't bore your skull, instead of only cutting your cheek. Come—you had best start!" added Dalton, sternly.

The desperado turned as if to depart, but then whipping out his pistol he faced around and fired. But he had a cunning and watchful foe to deal with, and the young man dropped to his knees as the flame spouted forth.

Then he arose, and as the outlaw saw the deadly muzzle bearing full upon him, he turned and fled. Swift as was his motion, the bullet was swifter, and with a wild yell of agony he sprung high into the air, falling in a quivering heap to the ground.

"It is rough, but how could I help it?" muttered Dalton, as he allowed the body of Roaring Sam to drop at his feet. "He brought it upon himself, and I warned him twice!"

Rapidly reloading his pistol, Kirk proceeded to where the Yankee had fallen, and bending over him, lifted his head. Then he let it drop with a shudder.

The bullet had pierced his neck, killing him almost instantly.

The young herder was deeply pained at the occurrence, but turned to secure Sam, intending to take him to the ranch, where the case could be investigated, and their reasons for the attack learned. As he reached the spot, he saw the outlaw plunging into the underbrush bordering the creek.

Reviving, he had feigned insensibility, in order the better to effect his escape. When left by Dalton, the desperado had improved his opportunity.

"Well, it can't be helped now, though I am afraid it will make trouble for me," muttered Kirk, as he turned and slowly proceeded toward the ranch.

CHAPTER III.

THE OUTLAWS' DEN.

THERE was considerable stir caused among the neighboring settlers by the discovery of a murdered man near the Three Pines, although nothing like what would have been in a longer-settled country.

There was more interest in the story of Kirk Dalton, of his encounter with the three desperadoes, and it excited strong feelings of both pleasure and revenge. The men slain were liked only by their own stripe, being both feared and hated by the honest settlers.

The young herdsman was generally liked and respected, and his words were not doubted when he told his story. Even Joshua Crane seemed to have forgotten his suspicions, and made advances toward the young man, who received them but coldly.

Roaring Sam had not since been heard from nor seen, but knowing his vindictive nature, Dalton kept a good guard against treachery. As for an open attack, that he did not fear.

There had come a body of new settlers to the neighborhood a day or so after the prairie tragedy, whose actions were so strange as to excite considerable curiosity among the older inhabitants. They numbered some half a score in all; there being no women or children in the company.

They seemed to shun all intercourse with the neighbors, and, selecting a site, began to erect a dwelling. The position chosen was a strange one.

Near the foot of one of the hills where at some remote period had occurred a land-slide, a spot was leveled and a stout one-story house was erected, its rear fairly touching the hillside. And yet, when the house seemed completed, the work still went on.

The men labored steadily, wheeling out dirt, and hewing timbers that were carried into the building, but which never came out again. Disagreeable suspicions began to fill the minds of the settlers as to the characters of the newcomers, but, as yet, nothing definite had been learned.

While the subject of the murdered stranger, and the two desperadoes were being discussed, Kirk Dalton kept his own counsel in regard to his love affair, at least from the ears of the Judge. He resolved to wait until he was cleared of all suspicion before speaking.

Even under the most auspicious circumstances he knew that his prospects of success were gloomy enough. As he had said, he was poor, and knew nothing regarding his birth.

The Judge was a very proud and haughty man, who had left Virginia because, failing, he would not live as a poor man where he had been, for so long, one of the most wealthy and aristocratic.

Emigrating to Texas, where he soon found an advantageous location, he was now in a fair way to retrieve his lost fortune. But as his worldly goods increased, so also seemed his pride to gain strength. Was it likely, then, that he would look favorably upon the suit of the young herdsman?

The lovers had daily interviews, and altogether passed the time very happily; but that one misgiving would often come up to shatter their hopes and dispel their bright dreams.

One evening, over a week after the conflict with the outlaws, Kirk Dalton sought his employer in his own room, and bravely opened his heart. His love rendered him eloquent, and he did not pause until he had revealed all.

The planter heard him out without any interruption. But when he spoke it was in a cold, hard tone.

He bade the young man say no more. That his hopes were ridiculous and such as could never be fulfilled. That he liked him well enough, as a man, but a son-in-law such as he was evidently out of the question.

Kirk pleaded eloquently, but it was like attempting to soften iron with cold water. Then he grew excited and declared that have her he would, if he had to run off with her before the father's very eyes.

"That is enough, sir," sternly said the Judge, rising. "I will excuse your further speech. Here are your wages, due, with a month's advance. I shall have no further occasion for your services. And since you have spoken so plainly, I will be equally open. If you are caught lurking around this house, or upon my premises anywhere, I will drive you from them with the dogs! I shall give my servants orders accordingly."

"You talk as though I was one of your negroes! But this is a free country, and if you try any such expedients, I will not be the only one to suffer. Do and say what you will; I

love Carrie and she loves me. I will have her yet, in spite of you!" cried Kirk, bitterly.

"Enough, sir—go! Go now, before I forget myself and chastise you as your insolent threats deserve! I am old, but there is sufficient strength in this right arm yet. Go, I tell you, or I will call the servants and have them kick you off my grounds!"

"I will go—but not for long. You have my word that I will foil you; make the most of it," sneered Dalton, as he turned and left the house.

He was met in the garden by Carrie, who was pale and trembling. She sunk into his arms, sobbing as though her heart would break.

"Oh! Kirk, you have quarreled with father!"

"Yes, darling—or rather he quarreled with me. That hope is gone now. I must leave you here, but only for a few days. Then I shall come and claim you. It may be best for us not to meet for a short time, as you will doubtless be closely watched. But I must hear from you."

"And how?"

"You know the live-oak on the hill by the ford? It is hollow, and you can easily drop a note in there without being suspected. By day after to-morrow, at the furthest, I shall expect one. Will I receive it?"

"Yes—yes, I will do it. And you?"

"I will do the same. I can keep you informed of my plans, and you must tell me how you are treated here. Now, Carrie, can I depend upon you? Will you redeem your word, so often given, when the time comes?"

"I will! When you bid me come to you, I will obey. I am all yours—through good and evil—joy and sorrow!"

"My darling!" murmured the enraptured lover, as he strained her to his heart in a wild ecstasy of joy.

Just then they were interrupted by the voice of the planter calling his daughter, and fearing to be discovered should he linger longer, Kirk pressed one passionate kiss upon her pale lips and then glided away into the shadows, just as the father came down the walk.

The exterior of the log-house built by the new settlers was dark and gloomy, although well lighted within. As it may be reverted to, more or less frequently, hereafter, a glance at its interior may not be amiss.

There were two good-sized rooms, nearly square, with an open doorway between. Both were now lighted up and occupied.

In the two there were probably twenty men, all told, rough, villainous-looking fellows, rudely dressed, but superbly armed, with rifles, revolvers and knives. They were gathered around a couple of rude tables, paying assiduous devoirs to the bottles and jugs of strong liquor that thickly studded the tables, and conversing in eager but low tones.

Among their number there were several men well known at the settlements, whose presence would have still further strengthened the suspicions entertained of the new-comers, could they have been seen.

"Sam, you hain't tuck thet 'ar Dalton yit, hev you?" asked Bob Rattlesnake, addressing the worthy Roaring Sam,

"No, but I'll do it yit, though! Cuss the devil! I kin feel his claws a-gripping my neck yit! They're wuss'n a blacksmith's vise—a durned sight!"

"What is the boss so durned pertickler about us not a-hurtin' him fer, anyhow? We could easy pick the varmint off ef so he'd on'y 'low us to burn powder," growled Old Mose.

"D'ye know what I think?" whispered Bob, confidentially.

"No; how sh'u'd we?"

"You won't blab ef I tell ye?"

"No—honor bright!"

"Wal, then, durned ef I don't believe 'at Cap'n Kit an' Kirk Dalton is the same critter! One feller couldn't look more like hisself 'n they do, an' then he sw'ars as he'll shoot the fu'st feller as hurts this Dalton. I've tried to see 'em both at a time, but I can't. Ef I find one t'other is missin'. I tell you, I b'lieve I'm right. Wish I had as many dollars as I'm sure they're the same!" declared Bob, emphatically.

"I don't think so," slowly replied old Mose.

"An' I tell you 'tis so! I say that Cap'n Kit is—"

The words of the desperado had been spoken in a loud tone, but he suddenly paused and stammered, as the outer door was flung open, and the tall form of the chief appeared upon the threshold.

"Well, Mister Rattlesnake Bob, why don't you go on? 'Captain Kit is'—what?"

There was a peculiar shade upon the leader's face, and a gleam in his dark eye that awed the desperado, bold and impudent as he generally was. His eyes dropped, and his voice was husky as he faltered:

"Nothin'; I was on'y jokin'."

"It is an unhealthy practice, let me tell you, and I advise you as a friend to break it off. I tell you, my man, that tongue of yours is entirely too glib of speech for your own good. Beware how you let it wag about me and my affairs, or I may crop it for you!"

The desperado did not reply, but as Captain Kit turned away, he cast a covert glance of deadly hatred toward him that might well have caused its recipient to feel uneasy had he noticed it.

"Boys," said the outlaw leader, "drop the liquor now, and listen to me. Our den is fixed up all correct, and it is high time we set about regular business. These meddlesome settlers are growing too inquisitive, and we may as well give them something to talk about. Even if they take to arms, we can hold our own against all the force they can muster, either here or in the open field.

"The other boys will probably be here to-morrow, and we must set them a good example. We'll make a raid on Judge Pierson's corral, and then take Claiborne's. The two will give us as many head as we can manage. We can take down the river to the lower ford, and then throw them off the track on the 'shingle.' Long enough, anyhow, to allow our reaching the first station. Once there, our share of the work is done. They must look to the rest."

A low but hearty cheer answered this speech.

"Good! I see you are just what I expected. Now we will arrange it all, so there may be no

chance of mistake. You, Red Hirble, will take half the men and go through Claiborne's corral only choosing the best head—two for each man, will be enough. I will look to the Judge's. But mind ye, boys, there must be no blood spilled, unless you are driven to a fight. If you can't get around it, why then give them the best you've got."

"Air we to come back hyar to-night, Cap?" asked Mose.

"Yes. It is only some forty miles in all; we must be here in case we should receive a call in the morning."

The chief now proceeded to give his men more minute directions, as to how they were to proceed, and then took a place at one of the tables, helping himself freely to the liquor. It was yet too early for them to make the venture.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MIDNIGHT RAID.

AFTER another hour had elapsed, the men arose, and opening a heavy door in the rear of the building, entered a sort of tunnel, of perhaps seven feet in height by five wide, excavated from the hill. After a few yards this suddenly expanded into a good-sized vault, dimly lighted by rude lamps.

The roof was braced up by numerous strong timbers, and at one end were a number of rude stalls, where were secured a score or more of horses, although there was accommodation for thrice that number. At the opposite extremity was a strong slab door apparently set in the earth, and which was secured by strong bars and braces.

The animals were speedily saddled and bridled, when they were led forth from the cave, through the building. As he mounted, Captain Kit turned to the two men who were to remain at the building, and said:

"Now, boys, you must be more cautious than usual to-night. Keep well barred, and don't admit anybody unless they give all the signals. Can I depend upon you?"

"Mighty right ye kin, cap'n. You'll find the den as safe as you leave it. Tom 'nd me kin beat off any who may 'tact us hyar."

"That will not happen, I'm sure. But if they give you any trouble before we get back, do the best you can. You may look for us about day-dawn. That'll do now. Go in and close up. Come, boys, we must go. A long road lies before us, and we have no time to lose!"

Red Hirble and Captain Kit separated, each followed by half a score men, and rode rapidly toward their destination. With the reader's kind permission we will follow the latter.

That leader seemed well acquainted with the lay of the house and grounds, and led the way at once to the most feasible point of the horse corral, as well as the safest for their purpose.

In these days of mammoth stock-farms, the scale of Hiram Pierson's operations would be looked upon with contempt and derision. But at the time treated of he was accounted a well-to-do man.

His wealth consisted in most of cattle and sheep, but he had some few horses, more for home use than sale. These—probably fifty in number—were corraled every night to guard

against their straying, either with or without help.

The cattle, at this season, were allowed to keep their range, both day and night. There were men whose regular duty was to watch both corral and pastures, at night, but oftener they would sleep the time away than keep honest guard.

"Mose," muttered Captain Kit, "light and let down the fence. Boys, half of you come with me—bring your ropes along—and help select the brutes. The rest will stay here to fix them fit for traveling."

The men selected rode silently through the gap in the corral, knowing that while mounted they could succeed in their purpose easier than when afoot.

"Take your time, boys," called out Captain Kit, in a guarded tone; "there is no hurry. Pick and choose. We can't manage more than two apiece when pressed so hard for time as we will be now. Take the flower of the lot, and be quick."

One by one the best-looking animals were selected and caught, then passed over to those who stood outside. In this manner nearly a score had been secured, without the slightest disturbance.

But then there came a sudden interruption. A loud cry arose from one end of the corral, and a voice shouted out:

"Hello, thar! what you—Thieves—hoss-thieves! Help, hyar!"

As he yelled, the somnolent watchman sprung to his feet and discharged his rifle at the marauders.

"Take those you've got, boys, and travel!" yelled Captain Kit. "I'll stop this fellow's mouth and then follow you. Ride as though the devil was driving you with a hot poker—off with you!"

The outlaws, though knowing their young leader for so short a time, had learned to obey him, and without demur or pausing to ask his reasons. And then the significant *bur-r* of the ragged bullet so close over their heads, told them what they might expect when the household was once fairly aroused.

With wild yells and hoots they sped away, half-leading, half-driving the terrified and snorting animals they had stolen. With whickers of alarm the remainder rushed for the gap and dashed madly away over the prairie, neighing and screaming wildly.

Captain Kit urged his snorting horse toward the spot where he could distinguish the dusky figure of the watchman, whose cries and shouts were still being sent forth.

The outlaw knew that, could he silence this man before the others came up, his men were safe for the present. They would gain such a distance that pursuit would be useless.

"Curse you!" he hissed, as he leveled his revolver at the figure, "stop that infernal screeching—do you hear?"

"Who air you?"

"Captain Kit—who sends you to the devil, his brother!" snarled the outlaw, as he fired.

The man staggered; he did not fall. Then his arm arose and a bright flash accompanied a sharp report. With a half-stifled yell, Captain Kit

threw up his arms, and reeling in the saddle for a moment, fell headlong to the ground.

His horse danced madly around the inclosure for a short spell, and then wheeling, fled through the gap, uttering a shrill yell of triumph and rejoicing at being freed from a cruel rider and master.

With a shout of exultation, the watchman sprung forward and stooped over the prostrate form. But he uttered an exclamation of wondering surprise and started back as he caught sight of the pale and ghastly face revealed by the moon's rays.

The entire household had been aroused by the confused uproar, and flocked, half-dressed, toward the spot, bearing such weapons as had lain most convenient to their hands. At their head strode the tall form of the planter, Hiram Pierson.

"Hello! there—you watchman—what does all this mean?" he cried, as he reached the gate of the corral. "Where are you?"

"Hyar, Jedge," said the man, advancing.

"That you, Myrick? But what's up? Where are the horses all gone to?"

"To the devil, I reckon, post-haste! 'Twould be hard to say whar else."

"And the firing? Confound it, man, speak out. What is the matter?" raged the Judge, opening the gate and entering.

"It means jest this. A lot of critters hes bin stole—t'others hes run away!"

"Stolen—and you here? What were you doing—where were you?"

"I war hyar. Mebbe you heerd my shot. But they war too many fer one man to stop. They rid away—thet is, all but one on 'em," slowly added the herder.

"But one—and where is he?"

"Out thar—lyin' down, sorter."

"You shot the scoundrel?"

"'Pears like I did. Anyway, he dropped as I tetched trigger. But I'm dub'ous 'at I've did a harm, Jedge," said Myrick, showing the way.

"How so? He was a thief—wasn't he?"

"I thought so. Anyhow, he shot at me fu'st. He must 'a' knowed 'at I niver pull twicet on one critter. He's see'd me shoot afore."

"Then you know him?" eagerly added the Judge, as they advanced toward the spot where the outlaw leader still lay.

"Don't I? Haven't I rid with him for n'arly a year?"

The Judge stooped over the senseless body, and then he too drew back with a cry of surprised horror. He too had evidently recognized the man.

"My God! Myrick, it is Kirk Dalton!"

"Jest so," gloomily responded the borderer, a tremor perceptible in his voice. "'Tis indeed the lad! Ef I'd 'a' known who he was, I'd 'a' thought twicet afore pullin' on him. But what could I do? His face was in the dark—he rid at me so f'erce an' 'tarmined, like, an' told me he was Cap'n Kit or some sech outlandish name, an' swore he'd send me to the devil. I've got his mark hyar—he shot fu'st—as you kin see fer yourself. The ball creased my neck. Then I—I dropped the poor cuss!"

"You did right—perfectly right, Myrick, and no one can blame you," warmly cried the

Judge. "He deserved it all—but my God! I didn't think that bad of him! A horse-thief—a murderer!"

"Look—look! He opens his eyes!" eagerly cried Myrick, kneeling beside the outlaw. "He ain't dead—I didn't kill him! Praise the Lord fer that!"

"It would have been better for him, perhaps, if you had," gloomily added Pierson. "Death is better by a bullet than a rope!"

"A rope for *him*—hang Kirk Dalton?"

"Yes! He is a thief—he has stolen my horses. That is a crime punished only by death, here, as you should know. Your word will hang him!"

"But there may be some mistake—thar *must* be, I tell ye! Kirk Dalton niver was a hoss-thief!"

"But you say he tried to kill you—that you saw his men run off the cattle!"

"I may hev bin mistook. I was confused—I hed bin asleep. No, no, Jedge, the lad is in-nercent. He'd niver bin so mean as thet 'mounts to! He kin 'xplain it all, I don't doubt. I'll sw'ar he kin!"

Captain Kit now raised his head, and as he beheld those who surrounded him, he glared around in astonishment. Then the truth flashed upon his mind, and he attempted to draw a pistol, uttering a snarl of rage and fury.

But before he could use it, a strong hand clutched his wrist, and wrenched it from his grasp. Then in obedience to their master's commands, the servants securely bound the outlaw with his own belt. Then the little party returned toward the ranch, which was now fully lighted up, and the scene of a great bustle, as the women servants, greatly alarmed and confused, ran to and fro.

"Bring him right into my room," said the Judge, entering the building. "I wish to question him."

"But the hoss critters?"

"It is too late now to start after them. They are beyond sight and hearing long before this. We will wait until daylight and then take the trail and run them to earth."

Captain Kit was carried into the room and deposited in a chair, still bound. Though there burned a strong glare in his eyes, a half-mocking smile wreathed his lips.

"Well, sir, what have you to say for yourself?" began the Judge. "What were you doing in my corral?"

"Taking a look at your horseflesh—that is all," was the cool reply.

"You have seen them often enough, Kirk Dalton. Do you know what may be the result of this night's work?"

"Better than *you* do, perhaps!"

"You are a horse-thief, caught in the act, and you know the punishment."

"I do—a hempen rope cravat, and a dance on nothing. But the seed is not yet planted that will grow the rope for my neck."

"The sun will never set for you again, Kirk Dalton!" solemnly added the Judge.

"It will, and I'll tell you why. I am horse-thief, if you please, but I can muster four-score good and true men who would face the devil himself if I bade them do so. We are a regularly organized band, and each member is sworn

to sacrifice his life, if need be, to aid a comrade. Their motto is—*blood for blood!* If I am harmed, they will sweep this entire settlement from the face of the earth. *That* is my safeguard!"

"I doubt your speaking the truth, but were I assured that it *was* so, you should not escape punishment. I have treated you like an honest man and a gentleman, before this, and now you turn upon me and try to rob me. Kirk Dalton, I thought better things of you!"

"You say you have treated me like a gentleman? Is it so polite a favor to swear you will hunt a man with dogs—that you will have your servants kick him off the place?" sneered the outlaw.

"Your actions since show that I was not far wrong in so doing."

"Not so. It was because of those threats that I did this. I told you then that I would not be the only sufferer, and I am not. Half your horses are gone now. When my boys come back, they will make a clean sweep. I tell you, Judge Pierson, you are doomed!"

"You will only live to behold your wealth gone—your house burned, and your lands laid waste. You will live to see your child—the one whom you thought too good for me—the wife—ha! ha!—of myself, or else some of the band. You will see this, but not much more. You will meet what you threatened me with—a hempen cord and a swinging bough!"

"Kirk, my lad," said Myrick, coming forward, "don't talk that-a-way. Say that you don't mean them words. You ain't a hoss-thief!"

"You are the man who shot at me?"

"Yes, but I didn't know it was you. Ef I hed, I'd 'a' spotted myself as soon!"

Just at this juncture the door was flung violently open and Carrie Pierson entered. With an agonized shriek she sprung forward, and kneeling beside the outlaw, flung her arms around his neck, crying:

"Oh! Kirk, what does this mean? Why are you here—and a prisoner?"

"It means that he's a convicted horse-thief," coolly added the Judge, as he strove to loosen his daughter's arms. "Carrie, arise—go to your room!"

"No; I will not! You want to murder him! You shall not while I live! I love him—love him!"

The prisoner gently bowed his head and pressed a kiss upon the upturned face of the pale and trembling maiden. As he did so, a great drop of clotted blood fell upon her arm.

"My God! he is wounded! You have killed him!" gasped Carrie, her arms falling nerveless to her side, as the gory blotch caught her eye.

"No, darling, 'tis only a scratch. I am not hurt," murmured the outlaw, and his arms moved as though he would raise her up.

The Judge stooped and raised the fainting form in his arms, and turned to leave the room. Carrie roused up at this, and struggling desperately, strove to return to her lover.

"No; I will not go! You will murder him—my Kirk! Let me go to him—he is wounded—he needs me!"

But despite Carrie's endeavors to free herself, she was borne from the room in the strong arms of her parent. The prisoner struggled fiercely to burst his bonds, but the stout leather belt was true and would not give.

He strove to rise, and doing so, fell to the floor, where he was pounced upon by Myrick and several of the servants. He was then raised to the chair once more.

He cast a quick, surprised glance around upon the faces of those near him, and noted a peculiar expression upon that of Myrick. Then the borderer withdrew to the further end of the room.

The Judge now re-entered, and again commenced questioning the outlaw, but received no satisfaction. Captain Kit would not admit being one of the thieves, nor would he inform who were the others.

"Sam," added Pierson, addressing a servant, "take this man out to the stables and guard him well. Keep your eye upon him all the time, and if he attempts to escape, shoot him without mercy. I will answer for it."

"You will answer for it sooner than you expect, mayhap!" significantly retorted the prisoner.

"Take him out."

The outlaw was led to the door with a firm gripe upon either shoulder, but then a startling occurrence took place. As he reached the door, leading out upon the veranda, the desperado suddenly tripped up his two guards, and shook their grasp from his person.

Then turning, with a fierce yell of rage and defiance, he leveled a pistol full at the head of the Judge, as that person sprung forward. At the report, Pierson fell to the floor with a faint groan, and then, before a hand could be raised to stop him, Captain Kit had vanished through the open doorway.

As the servants flocked to the entrance, they heard the quick trampling of iron-shod hoofs, a shrill neigh, and then another laugh of defiant exultation.

The outlaw was free!

CHAPTER V.

A BITTER ALTERNATIVE.

THE excitement was intense at this bold stroke for liberty, and no one thought of pursuit until it was too late.

At first it was feared that the Judge had been killed, but as one of the more collected bathed his head, their hearts grew lighter as they perceived no great harm had been done. He was only stunned.

The outlaw had not paused to secure an aim, and even this hurried shot told how skilled he was with the weapon. One little half-inch lower, and the Judge would have died.

Myrick was the only one who could have explained how the prisoner had so suddenly freed himself, and how he had come by the pistol after being disarmed. But he kept his counsel and managed to pick up and secure the leathern belt that had fallen to the floor.

The smooth cut edges would have betrayed too much.

Pursuit was made after the horse-thieves at

day-dawn, but the trail was lost on the stretch of shingle that covered the ground near the lower fold, and at length the quest was abandoned. After this, night and day the stock was guarded; no fear of sleeping on post now.

Carrie Pierson had been prostrated by the fearful blow, and had taken to her bed. The knowledge of her lover's being a criminal was indeed bitter, but still her love did not falter.

He had won her heart's love. Let him do what he might, she would never change. She believed that he would yet prove innocent; that there was some terrible mistake.

Nothing had been seen by the settlers of Captain Kit since that night. Some believed that he had fled the country, upon being unmasked. Others shook their heads and maintained a wise silence.

The settlers at the hill-foot still came and went, seeming to shun all intercourse with their neighbors, and were suspected more strongly than ever.

It was about mid-forenoon of a day perhaps a week subsequent to the midnight raid, that a strong body of horsemen filed along the path leading from the outlaw den, and took up their route toward the settlement. They numbered over a score, all told, and were thoroughly armed.

At their head, riding the strong chestnut mustang that was noticed in the first chapter, was Captain Kit. His bronzed face was a little paler, and less full, perhaps, than usual, and a snowy bandage could be seen beneath the brim of the soft felt hat; but nothing else told of the severe wound he had received so recently.

At their head he soon reached the ranch of Judge Pierson; and abruptly drawing rein, he turned to his lieutenant, Red Hirble, saying:

"Do you remain here, Hirble, and keep the boys from straying or doing any mischief. If you hear me whistle, then charge the house and clear everything before you. Understand?"

"Mighty right I do!" responded the red-faced and red-haired giant.

"Mind—unless I give the signal, you are to do no harm," continued Captain Kit, as he leaped from the saddle and strode rapidly toward the ranch, unheeding the frightened ebon-hued faces that were peering at him.

Running lightly up the veranda steps, he entered the open door, crossed the hall and turned the knob of the door leading into the Judge's "study."

Opening the door he entered, and then noiselessly closed it behind him. However, the planter, who was seated at his desk, was aroused, and turning, Judge Pierson sprang to his feet as he recognized his visitor.

"You here? How dare you, after—" he began, in angry surprise, as he reached toward a loaded revolver that lay upon the desk.

"I dare more than you think, Judge," coolly replied the outlaw, as he drew a pistol. "Drop that—if you touch it you are a dead man! I came here upon a peaceful mission, but if you force me to extremities, you will suffer, not I!"

"A peaceful mission—you, and to me!" exclaimed the farmer.

"Yes; but before I make it known, just

glance out the window and tell me what you see."

The Judge turned his head as bade, and then started back with a cry of surprise.

"Who are those men?"

"They are honest people who call me captain. I merely brought them along to insure a decent reception. They have orders to remain quiet unless I signal them. That signal I shall not give unless you force me to do so. But if I must, they will clean this ranch out in a twinkling. Now will you hear me?"

"I must. But be speedy. Your room is far more agreeable than your company," bitterly responded Pierson.

"More truthful than polite; but let that pass. I have you in a pinch, and it would be a pity to tie your tongue as well as hands. But take a seat; this business may require some time to dispose of it satisfactorily."

"I prefer to stand."

"And I prefer that you sit. I am a little weak yet, from this favor," and as he removed his hat, the outlaw lightly touched his bandaged head.

With a glance of deadly hatred, Judge Pierson resumed his chair.

"Lucky for me it is that looks can not kill. Remarkably keen eyes, those of yours, Judge. But a truce to badinage. You remember upon what terms we last parted—I mean in this room?"

"Yes, and in the other, too, when you tried to murder me!"

"It may be as well not to recall *that*, my friend. I mean here, where I asked you to give me the hand of your daughter in marriage. You have not changed your mind since?"

"Changed—are you crazy? Have your deeds since then been such as to render a change likely? You steal my horses, shoot me, and then ask such a question?" cried Pierson angrily.

"As I said once, let that pass. If you have not changed, you will soon. You noticed my men out there? Well, I can muster full four times the number, any or all of whom would gladly burn this shell over your head, did I but give the word. What I say they will do."

"Do you come here only to tell me this?"

"No. That is only the prologue. It was necessary, I see, to impress upon your mind that I am not the poor, friendless *vaquero* that you once knew. If I am a horse-thief, I am a king among them. I command; they obey."

"I believe you said as much before. You are tiresome as well as insolent, Kirk Dalton."

"Short and sweet is your taste, then? Very well; it is immaterial to me. Then, to come to the point, I love your daughter, Carrie."

Pierson glared at the outlaw.

"And more—your daughter Carrie loves me."

"A lie—a base lie!"

"You know that I do not lie. You have heard her say as much herself," coolly replied the desperado.

"Go on—finish quick, or I shall choke!" muttered the Judge, trying in vain to compose himself.

"Don't; it might be disagreeable—to you. Well, then, I ask you to give me your daughter Carrie."

"Never! I will die first!"

"You certainly will die if you do not, and then lose her besides. I tell you that you have no choice. If you refuse me now, I will scorch you out of here; I will give my men free license to act as they will."

The Judge could not speak. He seemed to be suffocating. His fingers worked convulsively at his throat.

"On the other hand, if you give your consent, I will disband my men and settle down here as an honest and peaceful citizen. I agree to protect you from all other persons, and treat you as an honest father-in-law. Carrie loves me. She will gladly consent to this. It will be a joy to her, and will save you from all the evil I threatened."

"You are a devil, Kirk Dalton!" muttered the Judge, great drops of perspiration starting out over his face.

He saw but too plainly that the outlaw had spoken no more than the truth. He had the power to make his threats good against whatever force the honest settlers could gather.

And that he would be as good as his word, no one who heard this bitter speech, and saw his stern-set face, could doubt for a moment.

"You are about half right, I believe, Judge," laughed Captain Kit. "But never mind that. Time passes; and I have not yet received your answer, I believe. You have heard all—now your decision."

"It is quickly told. Do your worst! I defy you and your gang of cut-throats!" desperately cried Pierson.

"You are foolish, man—and worse than foolish. Remember that she will be mine anyhow, whether you consent or not. The only effect of your opposition will be to insure your own death. Reflect well before you answer," coldly replied the outlaw chief.

"I have reflected—I have answered. I will not submit to such a rascally persecution. I will enter into no agreement or compact with a murdering horse-thief!"

"You are excited now, Judge, and do not know what you say. Still, I advise you to bridle your tongue. I can stand a good deal, and know how to make allowance for men in your unpleasant predicament, but if you go too far, it will be the worse for you."

"Now I will tell you what I will do. I will give you one week from to-day to reflect upon my proposition, and then I will come for your decision. I warn you to pause and think twice before you reject it, for I will be as good as my word."

"Another thing. Beware how you attempt to fool me. I will have your actions well watched, and not a person will stir outside the building, but that I will know of it. If you attempt to flee, or send away your daughter, that will be the signal, and my men will be turned loose to work their pleasure."

"But I have said enough. I guess you understand me. Remember, in just one week from to-day, I call for my answer. Until then, good-by. Please remember me to your charming daughter—my Carrie—ha! ha!" and with an ironical laugh, Captain Kit turned and strode toward the door.

Judge Pierson eagerly clutched the revolver from his desk, and turning, cocked and leveled it at the outlaw. As the metallic click met his ear, the desperado turned with a sneer, saying, in a *nonchalant* tone:

"Fire, Judge. It must be a great pleasure for a man to pronounce his own death-doom. My men are only waiting for some such sound, and I warn you, they will make a clean job of it."

The Judge stood glaring at his strange antagonist, with the pistol leveled full at his head. Captain Kit did not quail or flinch an atom.

"Come, old fellow, that is enough. You can't shoot me—you are afraid to touch the trigger. Drop that and act decent. Drop it, I say!" impatiently cried the outlaw, advancing a step.

As if compelled to obey against his will by one more powerful, the Judge suffered his arm to drop, and then he sunk back into his chair. With a low, taunting laugh, Captain Kit turned and left the room.

Gazing out through the window Pierson beheld the daring outlaw vault lightly to the saddle of his magnificent chestnut, and then ride at a mad gallop away over the plain toward the hill retreat.

CHAPTER VI.

JOSH CRANE AT WORK.

UNCLE JOSH CRANE appeared unusually restless and fidgety as he strolled aimlessly around the rude little cabin which he called his home. Full twenty times during the last two weeks had the worthy Mistress Hepsy wondered whether the old man had not "gone an' got 'ligion," he acted so queer and out of sorts.

The truth was he had received a severe blow in learning of his young friend's sudden change from an honest, steady, trustworthy settler, to a pitiful, mischief-making horse-thief, if not murderer. He had loved the boy so strongly and deeply, that it was very hard to bear.

This last affair—that of robbing Pierson's corral—had set the old man's wits to work, and he strove in vain to see his way clearly; the mist was too thick. At the best there was only the shadow of a plan in his mind, but one of which he hoped to make something.

He, like the rest of the honest settlers, had entertained his suspicions regarding those located near the hill's foot; and a short time since, while passing by the place, Crane had observed Kirk Dalton ride directly to the log-house. Could it be that he was staying there?

At length old Crane abruptly paused and a glow of decision overspread his countenance as he muttered a few words inaudibly to himself. Then he entered his little cabin.

"Hepsy, old gal," he said, as he took down his long heavy rifle from the deer-horn brackets above the fireplace, closely examining the state of the lock while speaking, "whenever you feel like it jest go to roost. Don't wait up for me."

"Whar you goin', pap?" the little old woman rejoined, with an uneasy look upon her face and in her still bright black eyes.

"Don't ax questions, Hepsy. 'Tain't no good habit. Mought make a feller tell a lie."

"Josh, you're goin' to meddlin' with them

fellers. Don't do it. They hain't pestered you, an', if they're the kidney you think, the sooner you let 'em be, the better."

"I'm old enough an' ugly enough, too, Hepsy, to take keer o' myself. But you rest easy. I won't go inter no fuss. I'm goin' to play moke, like, an' see ef 'tis raaly Kirk as is stoppin' thar. I hope 'tain't, for onless I greatly miss my guess that is a red-hot hole o' ho'nets."

"But you said you see him?"

"So I did, an' at the Three Pines, too; but he sw'ars I didn't. It cain't be thet thar's another feller so much like him; an' yit must be. Don't seem like the boy could 'a' changed so mighty suddint. But ef I git a good squint at this 'ere feller, I see if it's Kirk. You know the scar he had on his right hand—whar the brin'le steer tore it? I kin tell by thet."

"You'll be keerful, pap?" anxiously added the old woman.

"Sure. Why fer not? I hain't tired o' livin' yit, ef I be well-nigh seventy y'ar, an' you air a leetle sharp o' the tongue onc't in a while," chuckled Uncle Josh, as he turned and left the house.

He strode along rapidly, and yet with a wondrous degree of lightness for one who had passed through the trials and struggles of seven decades. He was following the same track as had Kirk Dalton when attacked by the outlaws led by Cock-eyed Smatters, but then abruptly leaving the beaten track, he plunged into a dense growth of underbrush, heading so as to approach the outlaws' den from the further, or southwestern side.

He had no plans mapped out, but trusted all to the spur of the moment. His principal object in the scout was to gain a fair sight at the strange man called Captain Kit, and to learn whether or no he was also Kirk Dalton, as he half feared would prove the case.

As the old hunter neared the vicinity of the outlaw's den, he slackened his pace and increased his caution. Thoroughly acquainted with the lay of the ground, he resolved to approach the building upon its south side, and then trust to fortune, aided by cunning, to gain the desired information.

Dropping upon his stomach, Josh Crane glided with the silent caution of a serpent toward the building. He could now and then discern a bright ray of light as the door opened, and could hear the sounds of many voices in excited conversation or revelry.

Evidently the outlaws were having a good time, and bent upon enjoying themselves.

In a few minutes Crane gained cover of the south wall, and crouched beneath shelter of a scrubby bush. Then his hands were slowly and carefully passed along the wall.

A little exclamation broke from his lips, as if at some gratifying discovery. Then he drew his knife and set to work.

He had found that the house was built of logs, unbewn, the interstices widely "chinked" with blocks of wood, then daubed over with clay.

With his knife, Crane cautiously picked out the dried mud, piece by piece, until a small block was left free. This he also removed, and then he placed his eye to the aperture.

The room was fully lighted up, and around

the rude table, sat over a dozen men, all more or less under the influence of liquor, and still paying assiduous court to the subtle demon that wielded such influence over them.

He could recognize several of the number as men of whom he had long been suspicious, and some of whom he had seen, with Kirk Dalton on the night of the stranger's murder at the Three Pines. A shade of anxiety overspread his honest countenance as he glanced around the room.

He dreaded lest his worst fears should be confirmed, that he would find his young friend and Captain Kit to be one and the same man. For the time, however, he was disappointed, most agreeably.

The outlaw leader was not in the room, and if in the outer he kept so close that Crane could not catch a glimpse of him. Satisfied of this, Josh turned his attention toward the conversation of those nearest to him.

"It was a good haul thet we made thet night, at Pierson's an' Claiborne's," grunted Bob Rattlesnake, or Carter, as he had been christened. "The boss was lucky in gittin' off as he did. Why didn't you fellows ride down thet cuss, Myrick, afore he tuck the cap'n?"

"Wal, you see it's jest this-a-way," replied Roaring Sam. "He told us to skedaddle when the feller hollered out, an' he'd settle his hash. We did, in course, 'ca'se the cap'n ain't a feller to be fooled with; not much! We heerd the shootin', but thought 'twas him—see? We rid on, an' s'pected him to j'ine us, every minnit; but he didn't, an' so as we knowed it'd do no good to turn back then, we kep' on an' left the critters as told. Then we kem back hyar an' found the boss all right, 'cept a skulp wound. He said as how we did jest right."

"Thet's it? I didn't know jestly how it kem about afore. But now how is this? Is he thet Kirk Dalton, or not?" whispered the fellow, with an uneasy glance around him. "An' ef so, what kind o' a cussed game is he a-playin', anyhow?"

"You won't none o' you blow?"

A general murmur disclaimed any such intentions, and then Roaring Sam continued:

"Wal, you know how Cock-eye an' Yank was rubbed out, don't ye? I jest got cl'ar by the skin o' my teeth. Ye see, the cap'n kem to me an' told me thet thar was a young feller as he wanted put outer his way, fer fear he'd make mischief. I axed who, an' he said Kirk Dalton."

"He told us over an' over ag'in thet we wasn't to hurt the feller on no 'count. Ef we couldn't take him alive to let 'im go an' wait fer another chance. He said thet he'd shoot the feller as hurted even a ha'r o' the boy's head."

"He picked out the boys as he said must help me, an' they war them as hed made him mad fer some reason or other. It kinder set me to thinkin', thet did, an' I see'd through it a'terward, too late. We found the man, an' he faced us like he knowed he was safe. You know the rest. He whipped us, 'ca'se we didn't dar' use the we'pons. I got cl'ar as I told ye, but t'other was killed."

"Now I hain't sech a durned fool but what I kin see through a hole, ef so be it's big enough

an' straight enough. I tell you thet Cap'n Kit is Kirk Dalton, an' thet it was a put-up job fer him to git us all outen his way. I'll take my 'davy thet they're one an' the same feller!"

"I b'lieve ye, Sam. We must watch him an' see what game he's up to. I don't like it a bit, an' I think he's playin' things so's to git us all inter limbo, while he'll fatten on what we've made."

Uncle Josh listened to this conversation with great interest. He found that others besides him had suspected that the two were one; and these men should know, if anybody.

Just then he saw the door open and Captain Kit enter. After a glance around the room, the outlaw leader motioned to one of the men, and entered the apartment beside which Crane was concealed.

He was followed by a tall, muscular man, a stranger to Crane. It was, however, none other than the lieutenant, Red Hirble.

Captain Kit drew a rude bench away from the table, at which all conversation had suddenly ceased, and shoved it against the wall nearly in front of the hole made by the spy. Then seating himself, Captain Kit spoke:

"Sit down, Hirble. I want to speak to you, and if you stand, all those gaping fools can hear me. That's better. Now how about that job I told you of? Have you done anything toward it since I've been gone?"

"No, simply beca'se I couldn't find him," was the low reply.

"But he is around here—he must be. If he had left we would some of us have noticed him. I would give five hundred dollars to have him here, safe shut up in the little room in the vault!"

"Ef it kin be did, you shell hev him," replied the tall outlaw.

"Well, I think I can give you a hint of where he is. But not here. I don't like the looks of Bob Rattlesnake and Sam, yonder. Do you go out and wait for me at the spring beneath the live-oak. I will be there in a few moments."

Josh Crane fairly quivered with suppressed joy and anxiety, as he hearkened to this conversation. He believed they were referring to none other than Kirk Dalton, and the last words of the outlaw chief resolved him to attend the rendezvous, although as a silent partner.

He understood the allusion to the live oak and spring perfectly. More than once had he quenched his thirst there and rested his weary limbs from the chase beneath the shady tree.

To this point then he must go, and leaving his post of observation, Crane glided rapidly and silently away, making a wide *detour*, the better to approach the spot without being seen. Discovery there would be almost equivalent to death.

And yet the old hunter fell into the very error he strove to guard against. He did not know that Red Hirble had already sought the rendezvous, and was even then awaiting the captain's appearance.

So, fearing to lose time, Crane was pressing through the bushes without much regard to silence, when he was suddenly startled by the sound of a low, clear voice. Glancing in its di-

rection he could faintly distinguish the outlines of a tall man.

"Is thet you, cap'n?" asked the voice.

"Yas—it's me," muttered Crane, almost before thinking.

But he soon discovered his error. The outlaw had noted the difference in his voice from the one he expected to hear, and suspecting that one of the men was playing the part of spy upon his actions he advanced, saying sternly:

"Hold on thar, you feller; keep yer place, or by all thet's holy I'll bore yer skull with a bullet. Who air ye, an' what 're you doin' hyar?"

Crane quickly formed his plans. He saw that did he attempt to flee, a bullet from the drawn revolver would assuredly overtake him.

Neither could he remain where he was until the outlaw chief came up, as to be arrested as a spy would be his death-warrant. There was but one resource; he must dispose of this man, as speedily as possible.

He did not hesitate for a moment, for he knew it was life against life. Unless victor, he must be vanquished.

So drawing his heavy knife, in the use of which he was an adept, keeping it concealed by one arm, he replied:

"I kem hyar to get a drink. Is thar any law ag'in' thet?"

"Who air you? You ain't one o' us—you're too tall."

"You ain't nuther, then, 'ca'se you're as big as I be."

"None o' your sass, my fine feller, but tell me who ye air, an' what you're up to hyar?"

"I told you onc't—a'ter a drink."

By this time the two men were not over ten feet apart, the outlaw bending his head forward the better to scrutinize the countenance of the stranger, while his pistol was half-raised; then he started erect, uttering:

"Ha! You're thet Crane feller!"

"Yas, an' you're—a gone sucker!" hissed the old hunter, as he drew back his right arm with a lightning-like motion, and hurled his weapon full at the exposed throat of the outlaw.

True to its aim, the heavy blade sunk to its very haft in the massive neck of Red Hirble, who tottered and fell, stricken unto death. But as he did so his fingers contracted, and the pistol exploded.

Instantly there was a loud tumult at the den, and the door opening, a broad blaze of light fell almost to the spot of death.

Josh Crane knew that to delay now would be fatal, and only pausing to extricate his knife, he turned and fled at full speed, choosing such tangled paths as he knew could not be followed upon horseback.

He did not fear being overtaken there, and only felt regret that he had failed in his main object. He felt confident that his blow had been fatal, and that no one would ever suspect the part he had played in this tragedy.

But in this he was at fault. Red Hirble had not been killed instantly, and as Captain Kit knelt beside him, he managed to reveal who had dealt the fatal blow. And then, over his dead body, the outlaw chief swore to wreak bitter vengeance upon the murderer, for the death of his loved friend and comrade.

Joshua Crane hastened as rapidly as possible to the house of Judge Pierson, and upon knocking was admitted by a servant, who said:

"Golly! Marse Crane, I was jest gwine fo' you. De Judge wants to see you right away."

"All right, Ebony; whar is he?"

"Here, Crane," cried Pierson, making his appearance. "I have great news for you, my old friend," and together they entered the library.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ASSIGNATION.

ON the second day following the night upon which Josh Crane disposed of Red Hirble, a horse and rider slowly left the spacious yard before Judge Pierson's house, and proceeded along the road leading down the river toward the lower ford.

The rider was a lady—Carrie Pierson. Her cheek is still pale and a thought less plump than when we first beheld her, but her eye is fully as bright and sparkling.

She did not draw rein until the hill overlooking the ford was surmounted, where she paused beneath a good-sized live-oak tree. Standing upon her saddle, she reached one hand into a small hollow at the base of a huge limb, and withdrew a small, neatly-folded note.

Regaining her seat, the maiden tore open the missive and eagerly perused its contents. It contained but a few words, and ran as follows:

"IN THE SADDLE.

"MY CARRIE:—

"I received your note, and hasten to reply. I will meet you at the place mentioned. I cannot write much now, as I am on my way to meet some of my men; but will have all the more to tell you when we do meet. I shall expect you without fail to-morrow. Until then, adieu.

"In haste, yours,

"KIRK."

For some minutes Carrie Pierson sat intently gazing at this note. There was a peculiar grayish pallor upon her features, that seemed unnatural.

In truth, this was an answer to a note of hers, asking for a meeting with the robber captain. Or rather she had first received one from him, requesting this as a favor, and she had consented.

Then turning her horse's head, Carrie rode slowly toward the hill retreat, evidently with the intention of keeping the assignation. As she neared the spot, her face lighted up and her eyes sparkled more brilliantly.

As she approached a small grove of trees at but a few hundred yards from the outlaws' den, a horseman spurred from beneath their shade and rode rapidly toward her. As the forest breeze lifted the brim of his slouched hat, the features of Captain Kit were revealed.

"Carrie, my angel—my true-hearted woman—I knew you would not fail me!" he cried, in an ardent tone, as he clasped her outstretched hand; the prancing of her horse could not promise more.

"I trust you—why should not you trust me?" was the softly breathed reply, as her bright eyes met his fully.

"True—but come; it is warm here. The sun

has little power yonder in the shade. Let us go there and converse. I have so much to tell you—so much to listen to."

Side by side the handsome couple rode until the shade was reached, when they allowed their horses to crop the short, rich grass, while they conversed.

"Let me assist you to alight, Carrie."

"No, I would rather sit here. It seems like old times. It has been so long since I have been able to ride, that it rests me more in the saddle than it would there."

"So be it, then. But now—before less agreeable subjects—have you changed any, Carrie? Do you still love me as you did before I joined these men?"

"My heart is still the same; I love you now as well as when you were my father's herdsman. What I said then, I repeat now. When I love once, that love will never change, unless it grow stronger. Are you satisfied?" was the soft reply, as her wondrous eyes rested upon his face.

"Yes—a thousand times yes! My darling, pardon me, if for a moment I doubted you. I feared you would look upon me as your father does. That you would think I had forfeited all claim to your love when I became a thief."

"Then it is really true that you are the chief of this band of—of outlaws?"

"Yes, I am, and I glory in it. They are men—genuine men; not milk and water imitations. And they look up to me as something far superior to them. With the majority I am almost revered. I am proud of them, and they are proud of me!"

"It must be glorious to be so free—so independent! Do you know, Kirk, that if I were a man, I could almost envy you?"

"My darling, you can share this all with me. They will hail you as their queen as gladly as they do me as their king. Will you share it with me? Say yes!"

"But my father?" hesitated Carrie.

"Has he not changed? I gave him a week to decide; to-morrow is the last day; I intend calling for his answer then. What will it be?"

"The same as ever. He swears that you must work your will—that he will never consent. But stay," she added, hastily, as the brow of the outlaw chief darkened, "listen to me. You must not make that visit, Kirk."

"Must not? My word is passed, and I will redeem it," was the stern reply.

"I ask you to grant a little more time. Will you refuse me?" softly pleaded Carrie.

"My men know the time. They would laugh at me if I should falter."

"But hear me—tell them that it is working right—that he will submit."

"But will he?" eagerly cried Captain Kit.

"I can honestly say that I have the strongest hopes of its all turning out right, if you will but be patient for another week. If, at the end of that time, he does not tell you to take me, I will go with you willingly without his consent, if you bid me do so. You know that I have great influence over him, and that I can do mostly as I please. I have had an interview with him since your visit, and he has yielded a little. He says now that if you had not robbed him, he

would raise no further objections. Have patience, Kirk, and it will all come right, never fear."

"You promise this—that if I wait another week you will come with me, whether or no?"

"Yes—I promise it. You can trust me."

"Yes, I can—I do. When we met last—that night in your father's grounds—you said: 'When you bid me come to you I will obey. I am all yours—through good and evil—joy and sorrow!' I will claim fulfillment of your vow then."

"If you do, I will obey you. Then I may tell father that you grant him another week?"

"Yes, if you wish. But I must call upon him to-morrow, if only to satisfy my men."

"Now, Kirk, that you have set my mind at ease upon that one great point, I must confess to you that I am very curious to see how you live out here. There are many and strange tales going the rounds, of the mysterious rites and incantations performed in that gloomy-looking house of yours. And some of the neighbors add that you have found a vast gold mine in there, or else why have you removed so much dirt from the building?" half laughed Carrie, glancing shyly up at her dark lover.

"They are fools, darling. The only gold mine we work is the purses of our enemies," laughed Captain Kit.

"But you have not answered my question, Kirk?"

"Did you ask one? Pardon me—I did not understand," he slowly replied.

"If not, I implied one. You are not half as quick-witted as of old, Kirk, or you would have offered to satisfy my curiosity at once. It is I who should accuse you of change—not you me?"

"Is it only curiosity, Carrie?"

"Why, what else could it be, Kirk?" with an air of surprise.

"You will meet rough and rude men there, darling."

"Rough, maybe, but not rude, while you are with me. Besides, I wish to see those over whom *you* rule, and to see if I should like to be their queen as well as I think," was her soft reply, and again her lustrous eyes met those of her lover.

For a moment he gazed intently into their depths, and then, with a low cry of intense passion, he clasped her in his arms and pressed a wild, ardent kiss upon her lips. Her cheek was deeply suffused as she released herself from his embrace, but her voice was soft as ever as she spoke:

"You have obtained your reward beforehand; surely you will not deny me my wish?"

"No, darling—I can refuse you nothing. You shall go, and if any of the men see fit to blame me for breaking the law I made myself, they will regret doing so. Come, darling, we will go."

Whatever of suspicion the outlaw chief may have entertained was now discarded as without foundation, and he led the way with a look of gratification upon his face. It seemed as if a great weight had been lifted from his heart.

He assisted Carrie to dismount at the door, and then securing the horses, he took her hand

and led her forward, unheeding the looks of wondering surprise, not unmixed with displeasure, that rested upon the rough faces of those who had flocked to the door at the sound of hoof-strokes.

"Men and comrades!" uttered the chief, in a clear, firm tone. "You all know the laws that I have made and you subscribed to. That none who were not legal members of our confederacy should ever enter this door, save as prisoners. I break this now, for the first time, if not in spirit, in letter. Have any of you aught to say against it?"

"No, not ef you say it's all right, cap'n," cried one of the men.

"Good, Hardress. It saves us both trouble, for my mind is made up. But now I will explain. This lady whom you see here is my promised wife, and it may be that at some day not far distant, you will be called upon to obey her will as well as mine. She has half-promised to become your queen!"

"Hooray for her! Three cheers for the queen o' the band!" yelled Hardress, and then a score of stentorian voices caught up the refrain until the old hills reverberated again with the echoes.

Carrie clung trembling to the arm of her lover, as if affrighted at their rough welcome. The outlaw chief divined her wish, and motioning silence, said:

"There, my men, that will do. Stand aside and we will enter. I wish to show my friend the house."

Obediently the rude men fell back, and with a native delicacy that told of a soft spot yet unseared by crime far down in their hearts, uncovered their heads as the young couple passed.

"You see, Carrie—these are our quarters. How do you like them?"

"But these weapons; really you—that is—" and then she faltered as her eyes roved over the array of fire-arms and cutlery that were suspended against the walls or were standing in the corners.

"They are the implements of our craft, pet," said Captain Kit, with a hard, metallic laugh. "But we do not use them wantonly. Only when forced to it."

"It is rougher here than I thought. Are those the only rooms?"

"Except the loft, up-stairs. "But do not fear that I will ask you to share such quarters as these. If you consent to my plans, we will have a nice little cottage built out yonder in the grove, where you will not be disturbed, and yet be near enough for us to guard you against all danger," and the outlaw chief gazed down upon the flushed and bright face with a look of ardent love.

"Well, that *will* be an improvement, but we can settle all such matters hereafter. For now that I am well again, I intend to take daily exercise, and we—that is—"

"Yes," laughed Captain Kit. "I need exercise, also, and none so good as horseback riding. Besides, you know it is not exactly safe for you to be without one escort, so we will ride together. Is that what your foolishly sly little tongue refused to utter, my pet?"

"You are a wizard, Kirk," pouted Carrie, and then their united voices rung out in joyous

laughter, sounding strangely musical amid those rude surroundings.

"But, Kirk, what is yonder door? There is no room there—does it open out upon the hill-side?"

"Not exactly; but *inside*. That leads to our mysterious gold mine—ha! ha! Come, I will show you," and igniting a lamp, he opened the heavy door.

Carrie uttered a little cry of wondering surprise as she entered the dimly-lighted place, and saw the numerous pairs of eyes turned upon them, gleaming like twin stars. But then a shrill neigh that sounded strange and unearthly, told her what they were.

"You see, Carrie, this is our *gold mine*. It is an easier method of enriching one's self, at any rate, if not quite so rapid."

"Then these horses are—!"

"Just so. Stolen, as some would call it; we say *confiscated*. We sent off a lot last night. These came in just before day. You see we have a kind of way station here, to receive such animals as are brought from above. Then we send them on to the next station, where they are served the same, and so on until they reach a market. Thus at day we are all at home. That is why we are so often called 'Night-Hawks.'"

"I see—but what is there? Another room?" added the maiden, indicating a small but heavy door built in the ground wall; the one heretofore alluded to.

"Well, yes, a small one. We keep it for such of our friends as we value too highly to leave exposed to the dangers of freedom," and again he gave vent to that hard, metallic laugh, that caused the maiden to shiver.

"Is there any one in it now?"

"No. It has never been used. Come, and I will show you it."

Unlocking the door, Captain Kit threw it open, holding the light so that the interior was visible. The walls, floor and roof were all of rock, neatly joined and fitted together.

At one end was a rude bench of rough-hewn wood; and above was suspended from a huge staple a heavy iron chain. A more cheerless cell could scarcely be conceived.

"Come, Kirk, let us go. It gives me the horrors in here. Besides, I must be going home. Father will be anxious, and I do not wish him to suspect my having come here."

"Very well; but first promise to meet me to-morrow where you did to-day. Will you?"

"Yes, I will come. But will you call on father first, or after?"

"First. I save the best until the last, you see. But come then; it is damp here, and you are not fairly recovered yet."

With a few more words Carrie was seated safely in the saddle and conducted by the outlaw chief to a point beyond view of the building. Then, with one last kiss, he stood and watched her graceful form as she rode rapidly away.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FIENDISH DEED.

As Captain Kit turned toward the house, with a low sigh, he was confronted by Old Mose and Rattlesnake Bob. With a frown—for he evi-

dently did not fancy either of the worthies over-highly, he demanded:

"Well, what is it you want?"

"A leetle matter 'o business, cap'n," respectfully answered Mose. "'Bout old Josh Crane, ye know."

"Well, what is it? Has he returned yet?" eagerly asked the outlaw chief, his eyes flashing, as he remembered the yet unavenged death of his friend and comrade, Red Hirble.

"Yas, he hes. He got back a bit sence. An' es some 'o us boys hes got a old grudge ag'in' him, back 'o his killin' the leftenant, I made bold to ax you would you let us pay the imp a fr'endly visit to-night, so's to settle old scores."

"You mean to kill him?"

"Wal, yas, it mought come to thet ef you sift it down purty clus. He's a dangerous feller to hev so near around us. Thar's no tellin' what devilment he ain't up to. Ef he's a-mind to do it, he could raise enough boys from round the kentry to wipe us out like nothin'. I half b'lieve thet is what he's been gone so long fer now," craftily added Mose.

"You think so?"

"I do, honest. But how is it? Shall I take the boys an' call on him?"

"Well, yes, I don't know but you had better. I had intended punishing him with my own hand, but it will amount to the same thing. You can go to-night; but bring him here alive if you can. If not, make a clean job of it. As you say, he's a dangerous neighbor," slowly replied Captain Kit.

"All right. We'll settle with him then, one way or another, to-night. Kin I pick my men, cap'n?"

"Yes; take who you please," and then the trio parted, the two coarser ruffians with devilish glee imprinted upon their countenances.

At an hour after dusk a little party on foot silently glided away from the hill retreat. They numbered some half a dozen, and among them were Old Mose, Rattlesnake Bob, Roaring Sam, and their most intimate comrades; as vile a crowd as could be picked from the off-scourings of the world.

In a short time the Night-Hawks came in view of the little cabin, and paused as if in doubt. The hut looked gloomy and deserted.

"How is it, Mose?" asked one of the men.

"Shore ye ain't mistook?"

"Shore? Yes, in course I am. Leastways he warn't thar this mornin'. I don't think he's got back yit."

"But he *may*—"

"Wal, we kin find out. I reckon thar's enough on us hyar to han'le the cuss ef he is thar."

"You talk big, Mose, but you'd be the fu'st one to run; jest as you did t'other time," muttered the outlaw, with a dissatisfied air.

"Shet trap, Foxy!" angrily responded the leader, evidently little relishing the truth contained in his comrade's words. "We must see it out, anyhow."

"Wal, ef he is thar, I tell you all aforehand thet I'm goin' to take the back track, now you hyar me!"

"Do as you please. It'll be a nice yarn to tell the boys," chuckled Mose.

"You won't be able to tell it, unless you do the same thing. He's a devil, that Josh Crane is," earnestly affirmed Foxy Jake, as he slowly followed his comrade's lead.

Not one of the party—although under ordinary circumstances they were bold and daring enough—felt entirely at ease as they marched up to the cabin. Josh Crane was a terror to them.

The hand of Old Mose trembled as he lifted it and struck a vigorous rap on the door of roughly-hewn puncheons. A voice was heard in reply, the voice of old Mrs. Crane.

"Who air you? What ye want?"

"Friends. We want to see the old man a bit, ef he's to be seen," replied Mose, trying to disguise his voice; but in this he was only partially successful.

"What do you want o' him?"

"Business, mum; 'bout them pesky fellers as hev squatted thar by the hill. We're in a hurry, too. Is Crane in thar?"

"No, he ain't to hum, an' I reckon it's all the better fer you thet he ain't, Old Mose. A mighty heap o' biz'ness *you* must hev with *him*! You'd better go back to thim as sent ye. You won't get nothin' here to-night," boldly replied the old woman.

"You won't open the door, then?"

"No—I won't!"

"Then, boys, le's bu'st it in. You see I told you right. *He* ain't hyar!" exultantly added the desperado; and not until then did the woman realize the peril she had precipitated upon herself, in part, at least.

"Hyar's a stick the old 'coon hauled fer backlogs," cried Rattlesnake Bob. "It'll do. We'll hev the door down in a hurry now. Catch hold an' give us a lift."

The Night-Hawks lifted the trimmed trunk of a small tree in their sturdy arms, and then pointing the jagged butt toward the door, started upon a run, with a wild hurrah of triumph. They anticipated no resistance; their revenge seemed assured them.

With a loud thud the log struck the stout door, shaking the entire house to its foundations. But there was a more terrible sound mingled with its clangor.

A blaze of lurid light spouted from the side of the cabin; a leaden bullet sped upon its mission of death, settling in the brain of Bob Rattlesnake. With a wild cry of death-agony the doomed Night-Hawk threw up his arms and staggered back, falling to the ground a dead man.

"*Thar*—how do ye like *thet*, you cowardly imps you? Come botherin' round me some more, won't ye? Now git—travel, or I'll sarve the hull b'ilin' on ye the same way as I did thet carr'on!" cried the old woman in a defiant tone.

The Night-Hawks dropped the log and stood for a moment as if petrified at this sudden calamity. Then they believed that Josh Crane was hidden in the cabin, and smitten with a sudden fear they turned and fled in dismay.

But this did not last long. The voice of the woman still rung in their ears, and they believed that she was alone.

"Boys, Rattlesnake is gone under. Shall we

let thet cussed old 'oman boast o' whippin' us all? I move le's go back an' finish up the job," cried Mose, as they all crouched under cover.

"You don't think *he's* thar, then?" added Foxy Jake.

"No. Ef he had 'a' bin, he'd 'a' follered us as soon as he shot. Besides, he'd 'a' given us more than *one* pill. Come, le's go back."

The party reassured, followed the Night-Hawk's lead, and they ran swiftly back to where lay the log. Another shot greeted them, but it only slightly wounded Mose, rendering him fairly wild with rage.

Then the log was hurled again and again against the door, that soon began to yield, cracking and splintering. Then it was dashed from its hinges and hurled half-way across the room.

Mose stumbled through the aperture, almost overthrowing the old woman, who had leveled her recharged weapon. But for the stumble he would have received the rifle's contents; as it was, he escaped by a slight burn along the cheek scorched by the flash.

But it was the last effort of the doomed woman.

Several loud reports rung out, whose brilliant blaze filled the room, and she sunk down, still clasping in her hands the rifle that had proven so faithful, stricken unto death.

Then ensued a fearful scene of barbarity. The surviving desperadoes, maddened by their loss, when they had anticipated an easy victory, wreaked their rage and fury upon the senseless corpse.

Old Mose, finally desisting, called his men off to plunder the cabin of such articles as attracted their fancy. Then the furniture was broken and piled up in the center of the room, after which a blazing brand was applied to it.

Then leaving the doomed cabin, the Night-Hawks stood around watching the scene of destruction with laughs and jeers of demoniac glee. Slowly at first, then gaining power with every moment, the blaze crept on until the entire structure was wrapped in flames.

Not until then did the Night-Hawks pick up their dead and slowly leave the scene of their diabolical crime.

They feared to linger longer lest the glare should call some of the neighbors to the spot, and they should thus be recognized.

CHAPTER IX.

MOTHER AND SON.

A FEW minutes after the Night-Hawks, led by Old Mose, sallied forth upon their fiendish mission, Captain Kit also left the Nest, on foot, but thoroughly armed, as customary. There was an undecided look upon his bold, handsome countenance, revealed by the moon's bright rays, as the broad-brimmed hat was pushed back from his brow.

"Yes, I will do it. I must know what to expect to-morrow. If he should remain stubborn, I must have some way open to grant him a little longer grace, without seeming to go wholly against my word. And then—I may see Carrie, my angel—my little true-hearted girl!" he muttered.

Then, as if all doubts were settled, he strode swiftly away toward Judge Pierson's ranch. In a few minutes he came in sight of the house, that was not yet lighted up, although the doors and windows were all thrown open.

As though feeling perfectly at home, Captain Kit strode lightly up to the veranda, where several persons were sitting. Two of the number arose and entered the house. One the outlaw knew to be Carrie; the other he believed was Mrs. Pierson, although not sure, as she was an invalid, and mostly confined to her room.

The settler peered cautiously at his visitor, and then recognizing him, arose with a haughty air, leaning upon the back of his chair. His voice as he spoke was subdued, yet cold and firm:

"To what am I indebted for this visit? I believe the time designated has not yet arrived."

"Not until to-morrow morning, 'tis true, but what are a few hours?" rejoined Captain Kit, in an even tone. "I come here to learn what answer I am likely to receive to-morrow?"

"And I cannot tell you. Or, if you like it better, I *will not* tell you until the last moment of grace has expired," firmly replied Pierson.

"It lies in my power to make you do so; but before we go further, perhaps 'twould be better to seek a spot a little more retired. Shall we walk? I have private news for your ear alone."

"No, we will go to my room. We are safe there from every eavesdropper. I will listen to you because I also have something to tell—or rather show you—in return."

Captain Kit gazed at the settler keenly, but could read no index to his thoughts upon that immobile face.

The conversation that ensued we need not detail, as it was in substance the same as had transpired at their previous discussion. But then Judge Pierson said:

"By the way, captain, I have a little surprise for you. An old friend, who is very anxious to see you. Shall I ring?"

"An old friend?" echoed the outlaw, one hand mechanically falling to the butt of his ready revolver, while his eyes dwelt keenly upon the composed features of the settler.

"Yes. Shall I ring?"

"If you please. But—wait a moment. I know you—and I judge you know me. If not, you should. I am here alone, to-night, but I have left instructions behind me. You have a little mark of mine there upon your face. Should you contemplate treachery, remember that I am tolerably quick on the trigger. An inch lower, and to the left of that spot, would—understand?"

"But what care I for your threats? If you fear, however, I will not send for this person," sneered Pierson.

"Fear! I don't know what that word means. Ring the bell. I am anxious to see this mysterious friend," and turning, Captain Kit faced the door.

Pierson touched the call-bell, and as if the person had been in waiting for some time, the door immediately opened and a woman entered.

She was of a tall and stately form, although considerably past the prime of life. She was

dressed in plain but neat clothes, and her face, though bearing the imprint of time's fingers, was still remarkably comely.

As these two, the woman and Captain Kit stood gazing at each other, the most casual observer would have been struck by the likeness between them. Then Judge Pierson spoke:

"Captain, you do not salute your friend."

"Mother," said the outlaw leader, not noticing the settler's words, "why are you here—what have you come for?"

"To see my son, since he would not return to me. But I did not think to find you like this, George. It was sad news for a mother's heart," brokenly replied the woman, evidently yearning to rush forward and clasp him to her heart, yet deterred by the harsh, forbidding look resting upon his features.

"Your coming here does not mend the matter any. But you, Judge Pierson, what do you expect to gain by this move? How will it better *you*?" he added, with illy-suppressed ire.

"Perhaps much—perhaps nothing. Madame, your promise?"

"Shall be kept. George, I ask you to abandon this wicked plan of yours. These people have never injured you. Then give over your scheme and come home with me. Will you do it?"

"No, I will not. I have tried an honest life until I am tired of it. As Kirk Dalton I drove and herded cattle for a dog's wages; but do you think it was because I liked the life? No. There were other charms here. I loved Carrie Pierson, and to win her I did this. Had you, Judge, treated me as a man, I would never have dropped the mask. But you did not. You insulted me, because I, a poor *vaguer*, as you thought, dared to love your child. Then I swore she should be mine, despite you and your threats. I could have taken her then. She would have fled with me had I but said the word. I did not say it, because I resolved to be revenged upon you first. And I say now, what I said then: that if you fail to accede to my terms to-morrow, I will keep my word. I will sweep you and yours from the face of the earth; all but *one*. She will become my bride, and queen of my band," triumphantly cried Captain Kit.

"George, this must not be!" exclaimed the woman, whom he had called mother. "You must not soil your hands with *his* blood—he is your—"

"My what?"

"Your *uncle*!" faltered the woman, bowing her head upon her hands as if in shame.

For a moment the outlaw stood as if petrified. Then the old reckless look returned, and he spoke in a low but scornful tone:

"So—that is the ruse you have adopted, is it, my good sir? Truly I must compliment you upon your astuteness. Yours is a very fertile brain; but while about it, why did not you make me *your son*? That would have been still more melo-dramatic."

"George, do not speak so. I cannot bear it. I would never have told you this, only you forced me to it, to save you from this great sin.

As God hears me, he is your uncle—you are the son of his brother. I swear it by my love for you, my only child."

"Go on—I am becoming decidedly interested," mocked Captain Kit.

"Oh, George, have pity! Say you will abandon this, and let us return home, where we may be as happy as we were before 'you were led into evil ways,' pleaded the woman.

"It seems that I came fairly by my evil ways, as you call them. I am *his* son—yet do not bear his *name*. The puzzle can be read in but one way. Is it the *right* way?"

"Yes!" desperately cried the woman. "Since you force me to it, I will tell you all. You are *his* son—and *mine*—but I was never his wife. These are your kindred—do not have their destruction upon your head."

"You rave; very foolishly, too. His family has degraded me; I will but return the compliment. If I hesitated before, I will do so no longer. And you—*my uncle*—remember that to-morrow I come for my answer. Let it be favorable, or by all the fiends I will make my oath good. Before this time to-morrow night I will have a bride—my band a queen!"

"You refuse to listen to your mother's pleadings?" added Pierson, as he arose.

"No; I *have* listened to them, and I assure you, they have great weight with me. Only—unfortunately for *you*—it rests in the wrong side of the balance. It decides your fate. But *adios* until to-morrow. May pleasant dreams attend you—ha! ha!" mockingly laughed Captain Kit, as he backed from the room.

Judge Pierson stood in the doorway, his head bent as if listening intently, an eager look of expectancy upon his features. Then a peculiar smile flitted athwart his countenance.

He heard the tones of loud voices from the garden. Then a hoarse cry—a pistol-shot—followed by the sounds as of a confused struggle.

Then for a moment all was still.

CHAPTER X.

OLD MOSE'S REWARD.

AN hour later a dark form left the grounds of the Pierson ranch, and took up its way toward the Night-Hawks' nest. During that period the tragedy at the old hunter's cabin had been accomplished.

A faint glow still marked the spot, but that was fast dying out. More than one anxious glance did the man cast toward this point, and twice he half-paused as if he would have turned his steps in that direction; but then with a muttered sentence he resumed his way.

His long, swinging strides speedily brought him to the hills, and then he uttered the peculiar signal used to denote the approach of one of the band. A small slide opened in the door and a voice sounded through the aperture:

"Who is it?"

"I—the captain. Open and let me in," was the reply.

"All right," and then the door swung open to admit the new-comer, being closed and barred behind him.

"Why, cap'n, you're hurt! What's happened?" exclaimed the door-keeper, as he gazed at the chief, whose head was rudely bound up with a blood-stained cloth.

"A scratch; that's all. I called at Pierson's ranch, and as I was leaving I had a little turn-

up with one of his men. The fellow made a fair snap-shot, but a little too high. He won't boast of it, though," and the outlaw chief uttered a peculiar laugh as he drew a pistol and began re-charging it.

"You settled him, then?"

"You see—one chamber is empty. I seldom have to pull twice on one man. There'll be a funeral at the ranch to-morrow."

"But how is it, captain?" asked another, who had drawn near during the conversation, Martin Homer, the lieutenant since Red Hirble's death. "How will it go to-morrow? With Pierson, I mean?"

"I hardly know. The fool is stubborn yet, and swears that he'll receive us at his pistol muzzle. But I don't believe him. We will give him a call to-morrow as promised, and when he finds that we are bound to keep our word, he'll knuckle under."

"And the girl—Miss Carrie?"

"As you know. She will keep her word, too. When I say the word, she will come to me. You heard what she said here that day? that she would like to be queen of a band of such men. After this affair she must be obeyed as much as I am. How do you like the idea?"

What reply Homer would have made is not known. Just at that moment another signal was heard, and the voice of Old Mose replied.

The door-keeper uttered a cry of surprise as he glanced out, at the sight that met his eyes, revealed by the broad blaze of light.

The Night-Hawks entered the building, bearing between them two bloody forms, which they then dropped upon the floor, rudely and carelessly, like some logs of wood. Then Old Mose pushed back his hat and faced the captain.

There was a look of defiance, as if assumed to hide an apprehension that could but too plainly be read upon his ugly countenance. Evidently he intended to bluff his way out of the scrape he had fallen into.

"Well, sir, what does this mean?" demanded Captain Kit, after a brief silence, nodding toward the dead bodies.

"He did it," muttered Old Mose, his eyes quailing before the stern glance of his chief.

"He? Who is *he*?"

"You know—the feller you sent us a'ter—old Crane."

"That I sent you after? But go on. Tell it all, and be quick about it, too. Look me in the eye, if you can. I can't trust you, else, Old Mose."

"Wal—we went thar—as *you* told us to, an' fu'st thing we knowed he shot at us, an' dropped Bob, yonder."

"What—without speaking? Didn't he ask you who you were and what you wanted?" suspiciously demanded Captain Kit.

"No, he didn't—didn't say a durned word, but jist blazed away. Then we went for the cabin with a log o' wood, an' bu'st open the door. As it went down, so did Roarin' Sam; he plugged him. Wal, we pulled trigger, too, an' the critter fell 'ithout a word."

"You killed him—Crane?"

"No we didn't, nuther," muttered Mose, uneasily.

"But you said—?"

"That the feller went under, but 'twasn't him."

"Who then? Come, speak out! Don't mouth your words so."

"Wal, then—'twasn't *our* fault. We thought 'twas him, or we wouldn't 'a' shot. Who'd 'a' thunk a woman 'd 'a' acted so f'erce-like?"

"A woman?"

"Yes—'twas the old man's wife. She—"

"What! You killed her—Mrs. Crane?" cried Captain Kit, in a tone of horror, one hand nervously fingering a pistol-butt.

"'Twasn't *our* fault, as I said afore. The pesky fool brung it on herself," sullenly replied Mose, edging back a pace, evidently not liking the looks of affairs.

"Mose Carter, I believe you lie. You are too big a coward to have faced even one whom you thought Josh Crane. You know that he has been gone from home for several days, and had not got back yet. You knew the old woman would be alone, and put up this job to get even with him; you and the cowardly dogs who went with you."

"Them's rough words, cap'n, to speak to a feller what went by your orders; durned rough! 'Tain't right, ef you *be* boss," muttered Mose, an ominous glitter in his treacherous eyes, as one hand glided slowly to his belt.

"You may have better cause to think so before I am done with you. Men, what is your opinion? Are we to turn into women-murderers? Have we come to so low a pass as that? I hope not. I have always found you *men* heretofore. I say that Mose Carter and those who were with him in this outrage are cowardly, murdering dogs, for whom a man's death is too good. How many agree with me?"

As he glanced around the crowd assembled Captain Kit was greeted with a loud cheer of approval by the majority. But there were near a dozen others who remained silent, with sullen looks.

Old Mose also noted this, and made a peculiar gesture to them. As if understanding the signal, they began working around together.

"It is well. I expected as much, from men. And now, Mose Carter, you and your comrades in this act, deliver up your weapons and surrender."

"What fer?" sullenly demanded the outlaw.

"To stand trial. If we find that Josh Crane had not returned home before you did this deed, you will be punished. If he had, we will look upon it as a mistake on your part, and overlook it. Come—do you hear?"

"Yas—I hear."

"Then obey. What! You won't?" hissed Captain Kit, as the outlaw whipped out his revolver. "Drop that—drop it, I say, or I'll send you to the devil—your master!"

"Go thar fu'st, an' tell him I'm a-comin'!" snarled Mose, as he threw up his weapon and fired.

Instantly all was confusion. Captain Kit staggered back and fell to one knee, his face fairly blackened, so close had been the pistol's muzzle to it.

But then he threw up his right arm. A quick flash followed, and with a howling groan Mose

fell heavily to the floor, his skull shattered like an egg-shell.

Meanwhile the others had not been idle. Foxy Jake and his comrades were joined by those whose voices had been silent at the appeal of Captain Kit, and drawing their revolvers, stood upon the defensive.

As the chief staggered and fell, his adherents, led by Homer, rushed upon those who stood up for Mose. For a brief minute, horrible yells and oaths, mingled with the clash of steel and ringing pistol-shots filled the room.

Then the voice of the chief rung out, clear and distinct above the din:

"Hold! not another blow! The man who disobeys, I will shoot like I did this dog! Put up your weapons."

He was promptly obeyed, and as the smoke cleared away, the result of the conflict was perceptible. Besides Old Mose, Foxy Jake and four of his friends lay dead or dying upon the floor, while not one but bore marks evidencing the deadly ferocity of the brief strife.

Of the other party, three had fallen; Captain Kit escaping with only a scorched face, as by a miracle. Mose had fired too quick for aim, and his bullet only left a discolored welt along the chieftain's cheek.

"Captain, what shall we do with the dogs?" asked Homer, brushing aside the blood that trickled over his eyes from a ghastly cut upon the head.

"Bind them and put them in the 'jug.' There's room if they lie close. We won't have time to try them until after this job for to-morrow. We must make an example of some of them then, though, or the league may as well break up first as last."

Captain Kit sunk into a chair, and quietly began reloading his pistol. Despite its disfiguration by the treacherous shot, his face wore a peculiar look; one that appeared exultant—triumphant.

As the mutineers were bound—some six or eight in number—he followed the party to the vault, and saw them safely locked within the cell, taking charge of the key himself. Then beckoning Homer aside, he spoke in a low, guarded tone:

"Well, that is a good job over. Mose and some of the rest had been a drawback long enough. I'm glad we've got rid of them so handily. But you are hurt, my friend?"

"A little—but it don't matter. The boys used to swear that Mart Homer was proof against both steel and lead, but this will let them out, I guess," laughed the lieutenant.

"Well, Homer, I was about to speak about our job for to-morrow. We must take the saddle early—about daylight. Will you see to getting them ready? That is, the time and what they may expect if Pierson holds out stubborn. There'll be nice pickings if he refuses my terms."

"Are you in earnest about doing this? I mean burning him out if he don't knuckle down."

"Indeed I am; never more so. But now you understand?"

"Yes. All will be ready by day-dawn. But you will be here?"

"Yes. Only my face smarts so that I believe I will take a little walk in the night air to cool my brain. Two pistols fired at arm's length in one's face, inside of an hour, are not the most soothing things imaginable. Who is door-keeper for the rest of the night?"

"Why, Steve Hardress. You remember you appointed him."

"Yes—I forgot. Well, you had best go and have some one look at your head. It may cause you trouble if neglected," and as he spoke thus, Captain Kit turned and left the building, cautioning Hardress to keep a close guard, and be ready to admit him when he returned; greatly to the surprise of that worthy, who prided himself upon the high opinion the chief had entertained of him.

With a quick glance around him, Captain Kit hastened toward the grove sheltering the spring, and was soon lost to view amid its dense shadows.

CHAPTER XI.

JOSH CRANE STRIKES FOR VENGEANCE.

THE eastern horizon was faintly streaked with gray ere the outlaw chief returned to the nest, and being admitted, he flung himself wearily upon a bench, and bowing his head upon the table, appeared lost in deep thought. He did not answer until Homer touched him lightly upon the shoulder, then his face showed ghastly white in the lamp-light.

"My God! captain, you are sick! What is the matter?"

"No, I have only been thinking. It is a momentous day to me, Homer, this one. It will either make or break me. If I fail now, I believe I would kill myself!"

"Is it so bad, captain? I knew you were smitten with the lady, but didn't know it had gone so deep."

"If I succeed, she is mine—*mine wholly and entirely!* If I fail, you will be advanced yet another step, my friend," and Captain Kit smiled a peculiar smile, sad, yet mocking.

"Why speak of failing? If we can not work your will by fair means, then we will by foul. You do not think Pierson will be foolish enough to resist, do you?"

"I don't know what to think. But I feel assured that something momentous is about to occur. It came to me as I lay here, and I can not banish the belief. But never mind that now. Are the men ready?"

"Yes. It only needs your signal to set them going."

"Give it, then, Homer, and have my horse brought here. I am not myself to-day."

"Cheer up, captain. An hour from now you will laugh at these idle forebodings."

"Or else you will feel as I do. But let it pass. Time flies and we must not keep the Judge waiting. I am anxious for the end."

Homer gave the signal, and the Night-Hawks filed from the vault, through the building, and then, led by Captain Kit, they rode off at a rapid trot toward the Pierson ranch.

At length they neared the ranch, and to their surprise, found it open and just as usual. Evidently there would be no resistance on the part

of Pierson that day, else he would have greeted them with closed and barred doors.

"You see, captain," said Homer, cheerily, "your fears were ill-founded. All will be plain sailing to-day."

"It really seems so. But for all that, there may be a trap hidden beneath this appearance of quietude. He is a stubborn, haughty man, and hardly one to submit so tamely. But we will see. Stop the men now. They can hear all that is said, and yet not be so close as to seem bullying. I will find out how the ground lies."

Dismounting, Captain Kit deliberately walked up to the veranda, where the tall form of the settler now appeared, having apparently been aroused by the ringing tramp of hoof-strokes. The outlaw chief, after a slight nod, spoke, his voice sounding clear and distinct, as if for the benefit of his men.

"Good-morning, Judge. No doubt you remember what day this is?"

"You have reminded me of it often enough, at any rate," sullenly replied Pierson.

"Very well, then. It will save the trouble of recapitulation. You know what I have come for, then, and also what *they* are with me for. Now, then—your answer?"

"Supposing I say that it is the same as before? What would be the consequence?"

"In ten minutes you and your family—with one exception—and your servants would be bound to these pillars, with the blaze bursting out from the house-top. *That* would be *your* reward while I would have my fair bride—my band its queen as well. You see, I hold the whip-hand of you."

"You *have* got me at your mercy; then act the part of a generous foe, and give me a chance."

"No—except the chance I have already offered. Give me your daughter Carrie, and all will be well. And be quick with your answer. I am getting impatient."

"Will you take *her* answer?"

"Yes, I will—gladly!" instantly replied Captain Kit. "Boys," he added, turning to the Night-Hawks, "he asks us to accept the decision of his daughter—the one whom you saw the other day. Shall we do it?"

"Yes—yes!" was the general reply.

"You hear," and Captain Kit smiled as he turned again to the settler. "They consent. Her will shall be law to us."

Pierson did not reply, but stepping to the door, called for Carrie. As though expecting the summons, the fair maiden made her appearance, and stood beside her father, her large, lustrous eyes resting shyly upon the face of the outlaw chief.

"Daughter," said Pierson, taking Carrie's hand in his and pressing it, reassuringly, "I would have spared you this trial, could I have done so. But now you must speak. The fate of us all—our life or death—lies in your hands. But answer truthfully the questions I ask you. First—do you love this man?"

"Yes," was the faintly murmured reply, as she cast another shy glance at the radiant face of the outlaw chieftain, who sprung forward, seemingly oblivious of the fact that fully two

score pair of eyes were curiously watching him, and clasping Carrie to his breast, rained passionate kisses down upon her lips.

A low, chuckling murmur ran through the flock of Night-Hawks, but this was checked by a peremptory word from Homer. Pierson bit his lips, and his face flushed, while his eyes glittered curiously.

"There—there, I believe that will do. I haven't a foot left to stand on. Carrie, I am astonished at you!" at length said the Judge.

"Why I—I couldn't help it, father. He is so big and strong," murmured the maiden, shrinking behind her parent, from the curious gaze of the outlaws.

"Well, then, I suppose it is all settled satisfactorily, except when I am to claim my fair bride," added Captain Kit, joyously; and yet his manner was not devoid of a certain tinge of anxiety.

"She shall answer that, also."

"Well, then—if I must—one week from to-day," faltered Carrie.

"You hear, captain? Is it satisfactory?"

"A week earlier would have pleased me better, but I suppose I must remain contented as it is."

"Very well, and now to confirm our new relations, we must drink the health of the bride and bridegroom," cried Judge Pierson, who appeared to be strangely excited. "Come with me, captain, and we will find something to do the honors with. I have some pure 'corn juice' here that I can honestly recommend. Tell your men to wait."

This speech was greeted with hearty cheers by the Night-Hawks, and then the two men entered the house. In a few minutes they returned, followed by servants bearing gourds, jugs, and leathern flasks, filled with the fiery home-made whisky, with deer horn cups and maller gourds for drinking utensils.

Then each man filled a hearty draught, drinking the health of the couple so strangely betrothed, with stentorian yells and cheers. Then, after a few whispered words to Carrie, Captain Kit returned to his horse, and dashed off at the head of his men, taking the road to the lower ford.

"I thought you were going back to the nest, captain?" said Homer. "You know you promised to send some men to-day up to Claflin's."

"That can be put off. We must try those fellows to-day. I wish to go by Crane's cabin to see what can be learned about the affair. There must be no mistake."

"Perhaps it would be best. But are you in earnest about punishing them—with death?"

"If guilty, I am. It must be done for our own good. The league would not exist six months, unless there was some semblance of law and order maintained."

"I agree with you there. But, captain, it will make trouble for us. I have heard the boys—that is, a good many of them—say that there has been enough punishment. If you press it, there will be another mutiny."

"So be it, then! The sooner all such scoundrels are weeded out from the band, the better for such as have some decency left. You will stand by me, of course?"

"Yes; you can count upon me. There will only be about a dozen whom you need fear. But we can count two to their one as it is."

"I hope we can get along without any trouble. We will try, anyhow."

The party was now riding along near the spot where had occurred the conflict detailed in chapter second. At the foot of the little rise, this road wound through a patch of quite dense underbrush and young live-oaks.

Crossing the hill, the Night-Hawks rode slowly into this place, unsuspecting any danger, chatting idly over the scene witnessed at the Pierson ranch. But they were doomed to a startling awakening.

A loud cry aroused them from their sense of security. And then it seemed as though the woods, before, behind and upon either side of them, were one mass of fire.

A fearful volley of rifle-balls was poured into their crowded ranks with a deadly effect. Over one half of the entire number fell dead in their tracks, while those who escaped a wound were the exceptions.

Then came the quick, spiteful cracking of revolvers, as with wild yells a score of mounted men sprung from ambush, rushing to close quarters. An herculean form led them, a pistol in either hand, his naturally placid features horribly distorted, his eyes burning like those of a maddened wild beast.

It was Josh Crane, striking for vengeance! Each blow was dealt with double force as he thought of his murdered wife. He seemed a devil—not a man.

Homer and Captain Kit had both gone down at the first discharge, side by side. Without a leader, the Night-Hawks did not think of resistance, although nearly equal in numbers to their foes.

Demoralized, they only thought of fight. Once within their nest, they could bid defiance to whatever force might be brought against them, until the rest of the band returned to their relief.

For a time this attempt was unsuccessful. Hemmed in, the outlaws fought desperately, striving to cut their way through the cordon of death.

Then the line was broken, and fleeing in hot haste, closely pressed, the Night-Hawks rode for life.

Nearly a dozen in all reached the nest, and were admitted by Hardress, who had been alarmed by the continuous sounds of firing.

As they entered the building and secured it for defense, they presented a woeful sight. Not one of the entire remnant but was wounded more or less severely.

"Whar is the cap'n?" demanded Steve Hardress, as soon as he could make himself heard through the furious curses and angry oaths of rage and pain.

"Dead an' gone, I reckon!" muttered one of the men, bowing his head upon the table, while great gout slowly slid from his left breast and fell to the floor.

"Don't talk that a-way, Hank Fellows," angrily cried Hardress, his face flushing deeply as he placed a heavy hand upon the ruffian's shoulder. "He never did— Ah!"

He uttered a loud cry as the man sunk back upon the floor, a tremor convulsing his features and a death-rattle in his throat. One great, gasping groan, and he was dead.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN KIT AND HIS DOUBLE.

THE day dragged on drearily enough to the besieged; for such was now the condition of the surviving Night-Hawks. Within half an hour from the arrival of the fugitives, the building was surrounded by the triumphant settlers, who selected stations just without rifle range, apparently resolved to starve the outlaws out.

Believing this to be their purpose, the latter were not inclined to force hostilities. Every hour gained thus was another chance for safety. The squad under command of Bogarth must soon return, and then they would wreak a bloody revenge upon the settlers.

An hour after sunset a voice uttered the regular signal, and peering forth, Steve Hardress recognized the form and features of his captain. With a glad cry of joy he opened the door and admitted the outlaw chief.

That worthy had one arm in a sling, and looked rather the worse for wear. He explained his unexpected appearance very satisfactorily.

His horse had received the bullet intended for him, and, falling, had smashed one arm of its rider beneath the saddle, the pain causing the outlaw to faint. But while the settlers were in pursuit of the Night-Hawks, he had crawled off into the bushes, where he remained concealed until nightfall. Then by close creeping he had worked his way through their lines, to rejoin his comrades.

Soon afterward the majority of the outlaws sought rest in slumber, nearly all more or less under the influence of liquor. One of the men who had remained at the nest was detailed as door-keeper, the prisoners in the cell all having been freed before Captain Kit's return, so they might do their part toward defending the house against the anticipated attack.

The outlaw chief sat at one of the tables, his head bowed upon his hand, while his face was turned toward the man on duty. That worthy, his senses blunted by his frequent potations through the day and evening, nodded drowsily ever and anon, apparently overcome by sleep. The other Night-Hawks were all within the inner room, or else the vault, sleeping upon their arms, ready to flock to the defense at a moment's warning should their fears prove true.

Suddenly there came a low, stealthy rap at the door, that caused the somnolent sentry to spring erect, with the customary challenge passing his lips. In answer came the secret password, and then immediately after it the private signal of *Captain Kit*!

The sentry stood aghast. He gazed first at the door and then at the outlaw chief, who sat with his head still bowed upon his hands. Evidently he was unable to comprehend how there could exist *two* Captain Kits at one and the same time.

The signal was repeated, and a low voice added:

"Come—let me in—quick! There are a lot of those cursed devils out yonder, and if they get a glimpse of me it will be all up. Open, I say!"

"Open the door and let him in," quietly remarked the outlaw chief, as he arose from his seat and drew near the door.

There was a peculiar smile upon his face, and a glittering light in his eyes that might not be easily analyzed. One hand—the unwounded one—fell upon a polished revolver-butt, and seemed to be caressing it; more than once it was slightly raised, as if to ascertain whether the scabbard clung to it or not.

The wondering sentry opened the door a few inches, and then, as an agile form glided through the aperture, it was closed again and hastily barred. The new-comer stood in the full blaze and glare of the rude lamps, his form and features plainly revealed.

A cry broke from the three men, as if involuntarily. The sentinel gazed first upon one and then the other, in open-mouthed astonishment. He rubbed his eyes as though desirous of awaking himself from some dream.

And truly it would have been no slight task for one to have told which was the genuine outlaw chief, the two men bore such a marvelous resemblance to each other. The same form, the same eyes, hair, features and complexion; only differing in garb.

And as if to carry out the resemblance still more completely, these two men, the counterparts of each other, uttered a name at the same time, and in tones of wonder:

"*Kirk Dalton!*"

The wounded man was the first to collect his wits, and he glided forward a pace, sternly gazing into the face of the other. There was a hard, steely glare in his eyes, and a cold, set smile upon his features that boded ill for the welfare of the intruder.

"You here? You are very kind, Kirk Dalton! I have spent considerable time in searching for you. Now that we have met, we will not part soon."

"True," retorted the new-comer, "we will *not* part very soon. I agree with you there. But whether this period will be as pleasing as you seem to intimate, remains to be seen."

"Why have you come here? Is life so worthless that you can afford to throw it away in this manner?"

"Ha! ha! that is good, I must acknowledge," laughed the other, sardonically. "You talk as though you *were* somebody. Pray have you joined the band and been elected as supreme ruler, that you speak so confidently?"

"I have—and you know it."

"I do *not* know it. This band follows one Captain Kit," angrily returned the other.

"I know it—I am Captain Kit," coolly replied the outlaw chief.

"You—Captain Kit!"

"I—Captain Kit; yes, sir. Have you anything to say against it?"

"Jim," added the new-comer, turning to the sentinel, "how is this? You know me; which one of us is the captain?"

The doorkeeper hopelessly began scratching his head, staring from one to the other with an air of ludicrous dismay. His mouth slowly

opened and shut, but he did not speak. Evidently the enigma was too intricate for him to solve in his present state of mind.

"Hullo, boys!" cried the second Captain Kit, in a loud tone, his eyes sparkling angrily as he drew his revolver and confronted his coldly smiling antagonist.

And then ensued a sudden change in the tableau. As the heavy tramping of the awakened outlaws resounded from the inner room, the wounded chief sprang forward, and with a lightning-like stroke, felled the second claimant of the honorable office to the floor. The heavy revolver-butt instantly deprived him of sense.

This move was so quickly and adroitly made, that there could be no guarding against it.

Then the chief turned toward the confused group which had just entered the room. His voice was clear and calm as he spoke:

"There is some deviltry on foot, boys. You see this fellow—Kirk Dalton. Well, he came here and pretended he was *me*, though I don't believe he knew I was here. He was the one who shot my horse to-day. He aimed at my head, and I suppose he thought he'd finished me for good."

"What do you think was his object in coming here, captain?"

"He could have but one," slowly replied Captain Kit. "Believing me dead, he most likely thought he could pass himself off as your leader, and thus betray you into the hands of these cursed settlers. You see he is very much like me—only he forgot the dress. Why even Jim, yonder, didn't know what to say when that fool asked him to tell him which was which," laughed the Night-Hawk chief; a peculiar laugh, but then he was a peculiar man, as the band knew only too well.

"He is like you," added the Night-Hawk who had spoken first, in a thoughtful tone. "Only for the dress he might easily have deceived us, had you been away. He is a dangerous person, and I for one am glad he is where we can keep our eyes upon him."

"It is Kirk Dalton. You all know I have tried hard to get hold of him before, for I feared he would work us some harm, with that face. He could have passed for me with almost any of the boys, and might have learned too much for our good, in that way. But he is safe, now, and we will see that he remains so. Take him, some of you, and put him in the hole. My arm hurts me worse, but I will go along and see him secure."

The still senseless body was lifted up and conveyed to the hole, and there securely fastened by the iron chain and girdle. Then Captain Kit relocked the door, slipping the key into his own pocket.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OATH OF THE BORDER.

THE reader will remember that when Josh Crane reached the ranch of Judge Pierson on the night he encountered the Night-Hawk lieutenant, Red Hirble, a servant told the old hunter that Pierson wished to see him immediately; and also the greeting words of the settler:

"I have great news for you, Crane!"

Truly, a welcome surprise awaited the old

hunter, when he entered the library. A tall form sprang forward, and clasping his hands, greeted him warmly.

For a time the scout was fairly dumfounded. He could scarcely believe his eyes. He was the person whom he had believed he had seen at the nest—Kirk Dalton!

In a few words the seeming mystery was explained, and both men saw they had greatly wronged the young herdsman by their suspicions. They comprehended that there must be another man wondrously like Dalton, who had well-nigh proved a fatal "double."

Crane listened to a strange and romantic story that will be explained in due time, and then the three friends consulted together and concocted a feasible plan for the discomfiture of the outlaw band. Each had a part to play, and with the stake at issue there was little likelihood of their failing from lack of energy.

Crane was to secretly depart and collect a number of his old comrades in the recent war for Texan independence. He felt assured that he could gather at least a score; perhaps more.

We have seen how he succeeded, and also at what a fearful sacrifice. He returned to find his cabin in ashes, and, within the ruins, the charred bones of his dearly beloved wife.

He was at no loss to account for this deed, and before another day had passed he knew who were the murderers. Only one of them lived—Roaring Sam—and against him Crane had sworn "the oath of the border." From that moment the Night-Hawk was a doomed man.

They both were concerned in the fight heretofore detailed, where the Hawks were so cunningly entrapped, and upon Roaring Sam's heart Josh Crane had drawn a bead. By a narrow chance—the sudden turning of his horse's head—the outlaw escaped the bullet.

Then he had dashed through the *melee*, and fled for dear life. The point chosen was the weakest, but yet it was in nearly an opposite direction from the Nest; a fatal error on the fugitive's part, as he speedily realized.

With a hoarse howl of rage Crane urged his huge charger through the crowd, and with only thought for the one man, he dashed wildly after the fleeing murderer. Roaring Sam heard the cry, and glanced over his shoulder. A livid shade crept over his features as he noted the avenger upon his track.

He felt that he was doomed. What brute courage he naturally possessed deserted him now, just when he needed it most.

Had his very life depended upon his doing so, he could not have met the borderer now hand-to-hand. He thought only of flight, and knowing the quality of the horse he bestrode, the outlaw plied reins and spurs until the tortured animal uttered shrill neighs of pain and anger.

Crane did not speak or utter a single sound after that one wild, mad cry. He bent forward and gave his horse free rein. The noble creature seemed endowed with wings, so rapidly did he go over the ground, apparently unconscious of the heavy weight upon his back.

For fully two miles the Night-Hawk maintained his vantage, and even increased it. But

his beast was light built; a clinker at a brush, but lacking in bottom. His bolt was already well-nigh shot.

The black horse thundered on in his rear, as though a mere machine. Not a hair was turned; not a single drop of sweat as yet stained the glossy blackness of his coat. Josh Crane knew that it was only a question of time. He had implicit confidence in the power of his horse. But one other upon the Texan prairies had he found that could equal him.

The outlaw plied his spurs until the long rowels dripped blood. He cast many a glance over his shoulder trembling. And as he noted the strides of the black horse his heart sunk within him.

He felt that he was doomed. A broad stretch of "rolling prairie" lay before them. Two hours, even at their present rate of speed, would not suffice to cross it.

And yet, in less than that time, his horse would fall dead, if indeed he was not overtaken before. Then he bethought him of his weapons. A lucky shot might disable the huge black or its rider. If so, he would be safe.

Scarce fifty yards now separated the enemies; less than three-fourths of what it had been at the start. There was no time to lose. He saw Crane disengage the lasso from the saddle pommel.

Turning in his saddle, Roaring Sam fired two shots. The tall avenger still sped on, untouched. Again and again the revolver cracked, until the chambers were all empty, and yet nothing was gained by the Night-Hawk. On the contrary, a good deal was lost, for unassisted by the reins, the chestnut horse stumbled frequently, and thus lost ground.

Then the long lasso was hurled through the air. Roaring Sam flung up his knife arm, but the noose fell over it and his shoulders. Then he was plucked from the saddle and hurled violently to the ground.

His horse instantly paused, his head drooping, trembling in every limb. The strain had been too great, and with a feeble neigh, he tottered, reeled, and then sunk down, the hot blood gushing from his nostrils. One great quiver, and he was dead.

Crane rode up and dismounted, and bound the outlaw's hands behind him. Then he sat down and awaited his recovery.

There was no expression upon his face other than the same cold, stony look that he had worn ever since he had first gazed upon the scene of death and desolation.

Roaring Sam speedily recovered his senses, and then, without a word, Crane tightened the noose of the lasso around the outlaw's neck, and mounting his horse, jerked Roaring Sam to his feet. Nor did the latter speak. The stony calmness of the old hunter awed him.

The avenger rode on, never once casting a glance behind him. Forced to a half-run, Roaring Sam trotted along behind, the noose tightening about his neck at every lagging.

Once he stumbled and fell upon his face. Crane did not pause. The groans of the tortured wretch were horrible, as he was dragged along through the harsh stubbles and prickly pears. Then, with a desperate effort, he managed to

scramble to his feet, black in the face, with blood streaming from his nostrils and from the lacerated flesh.

It was high noon when Crane drew rein beside the charred ruins of his once cheerful little cabin. It was now dreary and chilling. Roaring Sam trembled like a leaf; his teeth chattering together, his form quivering with vague horror.

Crane moved about in stern silence. Evidently his course was fully decided upon. The Night-Hawk could bear it no longer. Better know the worst at once, than be left in such agonizing suspense.

"What yer goin' to do 'th me, Mister Crane?" he faltered, his voice husky and dry.

The old hunter did not speak. He went to the little stable and wrenched apart the timbers with his naked hands, though an ax lay at hand. This exerting his enormous strength, though upon an inanimate object, appeared to afford him a peculiar satisfaction.

These timbers were flung in a pile, and then selecting one of the strongest beams, Crane deliberately sharpened one end with an ax, and then drove it firmly into the ground.

The craven wretch glared upon the preparations with a horrible fear racking his heart. He could not misunderstand the meaning of these actions.

He knew that he was doomed to the stake—that he was condemned to suffer death by fire!

He burst out with a storm of pleadings and prayers for mercy. He would submit to any punishment but that. He begged that Crane would shoot him through the brain at once, but not to torture him at the stake.

Coldly stern and impassible as before, the huge borderer proceeded about his task, and never once spoke in answer to the supplications of the Night-Hawk. And then as the timbers were stacked up around the stake, to which was fastened a long log-chain, Crane turned toward Roaring Sam.

In his Herculean grasp, the burly outlaw was but a very child, and despite his frantic struggles and kicking, Crane held him against the stake and then bound him with the log chain. Though his head was free, the chain wound around his body, held the outlaw upright.

Then Josh Crane spoke to his victim, for the first time since his capture.

"Sam Hebron, you've bin brung here to make amends as fur as your wu'thless karkidge 'll do it, fer a black, hellish thing thet you did—you an' your pardners. You've did this," and he nodded toward the charred ruins of the little cabin. "An' you must pay fer it, too."

"I didn't—'twan't me," faltered Roaring Sam, his teeth chattering audibly.

"Don't lie—'twon't do you no good; not a smich. I know you did do it; you an' Old Mose, Foxy Jake an' Bob Rattlesnake. T'others is dead; so'll you be, in an hour from now. I wouldn't 'a' minded it so much ef so be you'd 'a' come an' did all this when I was to hum, 'ca'se then it 'd 'a' bin a more even thing. I count myself good fer the best hafe a dozen fellers as you kin rake an' scratch up out o' your gang o' cutthroats.

"But you waited until I hed gone away.

You was afeerd to tackle the old man, you was, an' so snaked around until he had gone, so's you could aim a lick at him through his old woman. Wal, you murdered her; you an' the rest. They've paid as big a price as they were able, fer it; now its *your* turn.

"You see what I'm goin' to do 'th you. I'm goin' to *burn ye!* I've turned your face so't you kin see whar the old cabin stood, an' over thar, 'neath the black-jack, is whar I've kivered up all thet was left 'o my poor Hepsy. You kin look thar, an' think fer what you're a-b'in' punished."

"Mercy—mercy fer the love o' God, Crane; don't do this!" groaned the craven wretch, his face livid with fear and form quivering with agonized terror.

"No; thar hain't no marcy for such as you be. You cain't 'preciate it, if you see'd it. You didn't show no mercy to her—you mustn't look fer none from me. I've sworn thet you shed die the death o' a dog. I tuck the oath o' the border on it, too, so you may as well give up all thoughts o' life, fu'st as last. But I'll act the white man by ye.

"Ef so be you hev any messidge or word to anybody, tell me what it is, an' I'll do my best but what they shall hev it. Speak out—is thar any thin'?"

"Spar' my life—I don't want to die—I *cain't* die—I ain't fit to die! I'm awful wicked. Let me hev time to grow better an' 'pent o' my sins, won't ye? Say yes, an' I'll bless ye forever. I'll lick yer feet—I'll be nigger an' let you walk on me all day, ef so be you'll only spar' my life!"

"No, Roaring Sam, your time has come. You've run to the eend o' your laryit. But say a bit o' a pra'r, ef so be you was ever l'arnt any. It *may* do you some good herea'ter, though I doubt it 'mazin'ly. Go on. I give you jest ten minutes afore I tech the fire off."

The doomed Night-Hawk continued his pleadings, but he might as well have spoken to a stone, as to the man whom he had so bitterly wronged. All the love Crane had felt for his murdered wife—the companion of his youth as well as old age—seemed turned to hatred and all showered upon the murderer.

The minutes slowly rolled by, and the old hunter crouched upon the ground, his head bowed over the huge "bull's-eye" watch, that lay in his broad, horny palm, while Roaring Sam pleaded, raved, cursed and prayed by turns; but in vain. His doom was sealed. He must die, in part expiation for his fiendish crime.

"The time is up, Sam Hebron," slowly uttered Crane, as he arose and produced his flint and steel.

The outlaw was silent while the *click-clicking* continued, and his bloodshot eyes were fixed with a horrible intensity upon the tiny shower of sparks as they descended from the friction. Then one caught upon the piece of punk, and under the breath of the old scout, it gradually grew larger.

Then tiny shavings were placed upon the glowing spark, and breathed gently upon until they burst into a bright blaze, tiny and feeble at first, but fast gaining strength and power.

Carefully feeding this, Crane heeded not the prayers and supplications of his victim.

Then at several points the fire was placed among the dry mass of timbers, and when it once fairly got under way, Crane withdrew from the spot, and stood leaning upon his rifle, coldly watching the ascending flames, and the distorted features [of the ill-fated Night-Hawk, as he writhed convulsively beneath the first pangs of that horrible death.

But we care not to dwell upon this subject. It was too fearful. And yet it was scarcely more than justice.

A fiendish deed had been committed in cold blood. An innocent person—a woman—had been sacrificed to glut a vengeance against one whom the brutal murderers dare not confront in person.

An hour later, Joshua Crane still stood in the same position. He gazed upon the faintly-flickering embers. The post still stood, blackened and charred. To it hung, suspended by the chain, a horrible remnant of what had so recently been a strong man, full of life and spirit.

Then with a long-drawn sigh the avenger turned away from the spot, heart-sick and weary of existence. Only for one thing he would have ended his life then and there.

But until the last remnant of the accursed Night-Hawks was exterminated, he must live. After that, he cared little what became of him. The last tie that bound him to earth had been severed in the death of his wife.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEST RIFLED.

THE Night-Hawks did not seem inclined to return to their slumbers after this startling interruption, but stood around in little knots, conversing eagerly, but in low, subdued tones. More than one anxious or curious glance was cast toward Captain Kit, who had resumed his seat at the rude table.

His head was bowed upon one hand, and his eyes closed, but a keen observer might have noted the occasional quiver of an eyelid, that told he was not above stealing a curious glance toward the more earnest talkers. But he seemed perfectly at ease, for all that.

Suddenly he started up, saying to the door-keeper, who was still confusedly scratching his head, as though endeavoring by that means to restore his wits to their natural equilibrium after the shock they had undergone:

"Jim, what did that fellow—Dalton—say about there being a lot of the settlers out yonder?"

"He said thar was. Thet he was afeard as how they'd shoot him ef I didn't let him in quick."

"Of course he lied; but, yet there may be some who are watching the nest, ready to pick off any of us who may step out in sight. The grove is at short range for such men as they are."

"You don't think they *be* thar, do ye?" stammered Jim, shrinking away from the door; for the tales told of the desperate valor and ferocity of the settlers, by those who had escaped

from the ambush, had greatly agitated the worthy sentry.

"I don't know; but it is easily found out. Who will step outside and take a look?" added Captain Kit, glancing around upon the crowd; but no one stepped forward.

Perhaps they objected from principle to expose their tender bodies to the probable salute of a leaden bullet, merely to demonstrate the truth or fallacy of a surmise. The outlaw chief glanced around with a peculiar smile; but then he was a peculiar man. However, it lasted only for a moment; then he spoke in a quick, sharp tone, that told how determined he was in the course he proposed to pursue.

"Very well, then. I don't blame you. But I will go myself. There will be but little danger, for if they are there, I can pass myself off as Kirk Dalton, you know. He is in here. And then I can find out their plans. We must beat them off until Bogarth returns with the rest of the boys, when we will have it all our own way. And I promise you, we will make these cursed meddlers sweat tears of blood for this rumpus. We will sweep every horn and hoof before us. I swear it!"

Loud cheers followed this speech, and the Night-Hawks seemed reanimated by their leader's spirit. Then he bade them remain out of sight, and keep quiet until his return, but upon no account to open the door until fully assured of his identity.

The door opened and he glided forth, proceeding directly toward the grove that surrounded the spring. He was obliged to cross a bright, moonlighted space, and evidently trusting in the strong resemblance, he strode boldly along until he reached the outer trees.

A tall form confronted him, and a voice spoke; the voice of Josh Crane:

"Is that you, Kirk?"

"Yes," was the immediate reply; "it's me."

"Wal; how does the thing work?"

"Finely. Couldn't be better. But I came near getting into trouble. The real Captain Kit made his appearance, and I had to settle him."

"You didn't kill him?"

"No—God forbid! But I have him a safe prisoner. Now what have you decided upon—what we spoke of?"

"I reckon. But you know best. You've bin inside. How is it?"

"Well, there are only about a dozen of them in all, and I think I can get them to go and lie down again. Then I will settle the fellow on watch, and let you in. You can each pick your man, and do the job up as you please; either wipe them out at once, or take them prisoners."

"It'll 'mount to the same in the end, anyhow, but we will keep 'em to stretch hemp, I reckon. How long 'll it be afore you're ready for us?"

"I can't say. As soon as possible, though, for there is no telling when the other gang will be along, and if we are caught between two fires, they'll serve us worse than we did them to-day. I will hold a candle before the loop-hole in the door when I want you. Then come up and we will make a clean sweep of it," hurriedly spoke the outlaw chief.

"All right. But go back now, for some o' the rest mought take a notion to come out, and then stumble on some o' the boys."

"I frightened all such ideas out of them," laughingly replied the young man, as he turned and retraced his steps.

As the moonlight fell upon his face it revealed a strangely conflicting expression. There were joy, delight, fear and a peculiar shade of regret playing upon the handsome features, that told the captain's mind was far from being at rest.

After some little delay, caused by the doubting fears of Jim, the door-keeper, he was admitted and eagerly questioned as to what had occurred, and whether there was any truth in the assertion of the counterfeit Captain Kit.

"Not one word—as yet—although there may be some lurking around; I didn't see any one, and I searched the grove thoroughly. You may as well go and finish your snooze, for there is no telling when you will have another such chance. Those devils mean to make a clean job of it, I fear. Either they or us will have to be wiped out. My arm won't let me sleep if I lie down, so I will help Jim stand guard."

After some little discussion, the outlaws retired to the inner room and soon were soundly sleeping.

After assuring himself of this fact, Captain Kit turned toward the door-keeper, whose head rested upon his knees, while a heavy, rumbling snore, told how sound was his slumber. Gliding toward him with a catlike step, he at the same time withdrew his left arm from its sling. From the manner in which he moved it, the wound could not have been a very serious one, or else it had healed with marvelous celerity.

For a moment he stood over the somnolent sentinel, a shade of regret resting upon his pale features. Then a stern smile chased the shadow away, and he drew a long knife from his belt.

One arm shot quickly around beneath the Night-Hawk's head, and drew him forcibly back, thus garroting him. Then almost ere the eyes could open, there came a brilliant flashing as the steel shot down and sunk with a dull thrilling *thud* to its very hilt in the unfortunate man's chest.

A single spasm distorted his features; one quiver agitated his form, and a sullen, gurgling moan rose to his throat. But the strong arm checked its utterance, and then with an involuntary shudder the slayer gently lowered his victim to the floor, and withdrew his knife.

Then he moved one of the rude lamps from its bracket, and opening the slide in the door, used as an observatory or loop-hole, he held the light where it could be seen from the grove without. He remained thus until there came a low rap upon the door.

Gently replacing the lamp, he opened the door and admitted the herculean form of Joshua Crane. After him came over a score of hardy settlers and hunters, who had been collected by the old scout for the purpose, as before mentioned.

"They are in there, boys. Step lightly and take them prisoners. Don't use your weapons unless absolutely necessary. Let them have a fair trial. There has been enough bloodshed

already," and the young man shuddered uneasily.

Headed by Josh Crane, the settlers gently glided into the second room, and likewise the vault, each outlaw being singled out by one or more of their foes. Then at a signal from the young man, they pounced upon their prey, and without an exception, had them securely bound, with cords provided beforehand, ere they could realize their peril.

Deep, bitter and vindictive were the curses showered upon the young man by the betrayed Night-Hawks, as they beheld him standing free and unbound, smiling at their discomfiture. The smile deepened to a laugh, as he replied:

"Spare your curses, my good friends, until you are sure who you are addressing. I am not your leader—never was, only in seeming. You were kind enough to assist my plans by making Captain Kit, as he calls himself, a prisoner, and putting him in the hole, yonder. I am *Kirk Dalton*, very much at your service," and the young man bowed mockingly.

The real Captain Kit was now brought from the stone cell, and as the outlaws perceived how they had been duped by a bold and cunning enemy, their rage was frightful. But the harm was done, and it was entirely too late for reprimands.

The prisoners were secured in the vault, and the settlers assumed their places, the better to receive the anticipated visit of Bogarth and his men. On the next day those worthies came in with a fine lot of stolen animals, and being surprised, were secured after a brief but desperate fight, in which several were killed upon either side.

A week afterward the lot were brought before Judge Lynch, and the more desperate sentenced to be hung, while the rest were terribly scourged and ordered to leave the country, an order they were only too glad to obey.

The capital sentence was carried out, and proved the means of stopping all further depredations in that section of the State.

A few words will suffice to connect all scattered threads.

The night that Captain Kit visited Pierson's ranch, alone—when he met his mother—he was captured in the garden by Dalton and several others. Then Kirk assumed the outlaw's part, and, posted by Carrie regarding the interior of the house, he had taken the chief's post, the better to exterminate the band.

Captain Kit—or George Harkin—had only thought of his scheme since accepting command of the "station." He had noticed both Carrie and Kirk at their meeting near the grove (chapter second), and, fired with a wild passion, resolved to win her for himself.

Spying around the ranch afterward, he had even heard the conversation between Judge Pierson and the *vaquero*, when the suit of the latter was scorned. And following Kirk, he also eavesdropped the vow uttered by Carrie, in the garden; afterward making adroit use of the knowledge, to sustain the belief that he was in reality the young herdsman.

In his first disappointment, Dalton had ridden assiduously to Millican, where he met a friend who delivered a message, telling him, that the

mystery of his birth would be solved, if he hastened at once to Galveston. He did so, and found Katherine Harkin, the mother of Captain Kit.

She told him a strange story, but substantiated by ample proofs, that he was the legitimate son of Caspar Pierson, then residing in Alabama. He had been stolen in infancy by her, in revenge against the man who had first deceived and then deserted her.

Finally Kirk Dalton—or Caspar Pierson—prevailed upon her to accompany him to the home of her he loved, confident that *his uncle* would no longer reject his suit. Fortunately, they escaped the notice of Captain Kit's spies, and the visit resulted as detailed.

Carrie, too, had played her part in the drama. It was absolutely essential to the success of their plans that some definite knowledge was had of the interior of the nest. Hence her note to, and meeting with, Captain Kit, acting as though she believed him her true lover.

Before the trial took place, Katherine Harkin managed to gain access to her son, and together they committed suicide. Better that than death by the rope, that otherwise awaited him. So died Caspar Pierson's half-brother.

Caspar, first received by his family, wedded the true-hearted Carrie, and lived upon the place where they first learned to love one another, and are now among the wealthiest stock-growers of Texas.

Josh Crane sunk into a sort of stupor, after the excitement was over, and died within a month from the brutal murder of his dearly beloved wife. United so long, he could not exist without her.

THE END.

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